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Summary

Sakura becomes the local doctor in the quaint town of Pompeii, where not all is as it seems.
Chapter 1

The greyhound bus didn’t take anyone all the way into Pompeii. There was construction on the roads that made it too rough for anything not sporting four wheel drive to make the climb up. That was fine. The drop off point was less than a mile away from the town, famous for it’s crips beauty and distinct lack of volcanic activity.

“Wait, so you’re walking?”

Sakura winced, pulling the bluetooth ear piece out and glaring at it before replacing it again once the ringing in her ear had subsided. “Ami, you know I can hear, right?”

“I told you to buy a car before you left. You’re hiking a mile with luggage. What kind of sweet hell is that?” her friend ranted, likely huffing and puffing from the recliner in her dad’s loft apartment just north of central Manhattan. It was a weekday, she wouldn’t be at her own place. “Do they not have taxies in the boonies? What about Uber?”

“A mile is nothing to worry about, and I have comfortable shoes,” Sakura replied, feeling the weight of her duffle bag increase as if the acknowledgment of it’s existence made it that much heavier.

She didn’t mention the fact that her bank account was starting to look like the clearance price of a lightly used sofa sectional. A taxi might have put her in the red if it had a high enough rate. It was also the main reason she was taking up a position as a general practitioner for the nowhere town instead of completing her residency in the city. She needed to make a living and build up a better bedside manner if she ever wanted to qualify for a Cardiothoracic Surgery Fellowship somewhere down the road.

“I’m going to miss you. Who’s going to remind me to go to bed at a decent hour? No one’s ever put up with me as long as you have,” Ami sniffed on the other end of the line. “You’ve finally left me… a-all for some stupid town no one wants to practice in.”

Sakura could hear the waterworks coming and laughed to ease the tension. “It’s not that bad. From what I heard there’s not that high a need for a doctor and they’ve been stubbornly resilient since the last one up and left. It’s not a busy place. I’ll have plenty of yearly check ups to practice my bedside manner on so it’s perfect for me. Everyone wants to save the day in a big way and forgets about the little guys. I think I’ll fit in just fine.”

“Yeah, but I think you’re forgetting the most important thing here: me. When will I see you again? I’m so lonely.”

“Ami, you’re married.”

“Yeah but that’s different.”

“Hang on,” Sakura said, pausing on the side of the road. She blinked and then turned around, searching for the curve she could have sworn she had already passed over. That pine tree looked oddly familiar. “Ami, how long have I been on this call with you?”

“Not long enough.”

Sakura pulled out her cell and checked the time. She’d been on the phone twenty one minutes. She should have seen the town by now. She wasn’t a slow walker either, in spite of her luggage. She felt a vibration in her ear and then a crackle as her cell phone screen showed only one bar left, and even
that one was blinking.

“Ami, your signal is starting to break up so I’m going to have to end the call. I think I’m close to the town, I’ll email you when I get there.”

“Your phone is old, that’s why. Sakura…come back soon! I miss you.”

“Love you too,” Sakura fondly cooed before ending the call and replacing the cell in her jacket’s front pocket.

Without the distraction, Sakura took another look around and decided she was in a new area and that she hadn’t turned herself around. She was being silly, thinking she had passed by the same way when she never once turned off the road. Ami’s call had just distracted her. Silly, silly, silly.

Sakura started walking again and in another minuet she could see the curve in the road that lead into a main street where a dozen different store fronts showed off open faces. A handful of cars were parked on the street outside and people were out and about. The further she walked the more of the town she could see and she was amazed by how big it was for being in such an out of the way location. There were plenty of people and cars, even if she hadn’t seen a single one on the road up from the greyhound stop.

Something like excitement made Sakura’s heart skip in her chest and she couldn’t help but smile. There had been more than one reason she settled on the occupancy at Pompeii and not one of the more local cities. Of course it was an interesting place that Sakura felt she could do well in, but aside from that she already knew someone in town.

There was a mess of things in the bottom pockets of her windbreaker but Sakura grabbed onto the old letter fairly easily. Her duffle started to slide so she heaved it up, higher on her shoulder while she looked over the last letter she ever received from Ino.

“Beauty parlor, that makes so much sense,” Sakura hummed with a giddy smile. It had been years since she was a child in elementary school being randomly set up with a penpal from somewhere random in the country. What a fun twist of fate that years later they would be living in the same town…for a year at least.

Sakura had left her old address before she could get a reply from Ino, but she figured her letter had arrived before her. There had been enough photos sent between the two of them that Sakura was confident she would be able to recognize the blond in a crowd.

Sakura replaced the letter and left the street for the sidewalk, sidestepping shoppers with her oversized luggage. She past a post office, a bank, and a hardware store before she found the beauty parlor that was where Ino worked as a stylist. The exterior had a charming dated look that made Sakura feel like she was stepping backwards in time to an era when such places were gossip hubs for the well connected as much as they were service shops.

A bell announced her arrival and she let the glass door swing shut behind her as she took in the rows of mirrored stations scattered by ladies getting treated and pampered.

“Can I help you?”

Sakura blinks and remembers where she is. There is a young girl with pale eyes sitting behind the counter looking like she would rather be anywhere else. The girl was staring out the window, but her comment had obviously been directed at Sakura.

Sakura tried not to feel silly. “I was wondering if Ino was free. I’m not here for an appointment,
The girl blinked and looked up, pale eyes narrowed as she took Sakura in from head to toe. “Ino’s in the back. I think she just finished a shampoo but she didn’t say she was expecting anyone.” Her eyes narrowed and Sakura felt diminished by the stare. “Who are you?”

“SAKURA!”

Both girls turned at the sound of the booming call. Sakura had seconds before the blur nearly knocked her over. Bracing Sakura dropped her duffle and cradled the blond before Ino could fall or drag the both of them down. Sakura felt her shoulders strain from Ino’s arms around them and her hips were starting to hurt from where Ino hung there.

“Ino pig…” Sakura coughed, staggering. “You’re heavier than I imagined.”

Ino dropped to the floor and took half a step back to flick her friend’s face, right between the eyebrows. “And your forehead is even bigger in person. I should rent space there and advertise.”

“Careful, I’m expensive,” Sakura teased, absently reaching up to rub one of her shoulders. “You look well though. Not too busy?”

“Me, I look well? You’re here, you’re here.” Ino gasped, reaching forward and squishing Sakura’s face between her hands before laughing and pinching Sakura all over, manipulating small areas of flesh with childlike wonder. “You’re really real.”

Sakura smiled, too happy to be annoyed with all the pinching. “Yeah, one of my many redeeming qualities in a laundry list of characteristics to be proud of.”

“You have to stay with me! Do you have a place to stay yet? No, I insist, you have to stay with me, I need to keep you to myself as much as I can until I am convinced it’s safe for you not to loose yourself in this sprawling metropolis. Oh, look at you, you’ll never survive without me. Is that maroon eyeliner, darling?”

Sakura pushes Ino away and shakes her head. ”No, it’s not, and I think I already have a place to stay. I read somewhere in the contract that the job comes with a house…you’re free to stay with me there and help me tidy it up if you want? I really want to unpack.”

Ino looked down at the oversized duffle. “Unpack what?”

Sakura frowned, ears burning. “I have a backpack too. I-I thought it better to travel light. I do own stuff.”

Ino hums, eyes bright and smile wide. “Sure you do, hun.” She made a grab and snatched up Sakura duffle before Sakura could and heaved it up onto her shoulders. “But that’s that and this is this. We’ll go shopping later to fix all your woes. Let me be the one to show you to the hell hole.”

Sakura blinked, feeling off beat. “The hell hole?”

“Oh, did I say that, I meant the doctor’s!” Ino laughed behind her hand innocently while walking backwards to the door and turning just in time to slip out. “Silly me. Ah, same difference though. The last quack they hired was a sadistic little cockroach. We’ve had such bad luck with doctors here. I’m glad you are here though. I might actually go in for a physical now-my headaches have been killing me.”

The bell tinkled as Sakura slipped out after Ino, trusting her friend was free to skip from work for a
few minutes. “I’ll set up an appointment for you once I get settled.”

“Yeah, I guess I’ll need a full physical. Ah, but I think I’ll look forward to it this time if it’s you.”

Ino turned sharp and sure onto the sidewalk, having the route already memorized, nodding to a big building on the corner of the street that was split to make room for two different businesses. It wasn’t until they got closer and crossed the street that Sakura could read the two signs.

“I’m next door to a dentist. Is that a plus?”

Ino shrugged, leaning up the steps to the duplex. “Kimimaro is nice enough, he’s kind of cold and emotionless if you ask me, but I’ve been told I’m not the best judge of character. He’s good for his work though….cute enough too if you like them pale and quiet.”

Sakura hummed thoughtfully before following Ino up the stairs and into the building marked for the Pompeii MD. No other name was listed and Sakura figured no one else had stayed long enough to add their credentials.

Ino held the door open for Sakura but let it ease shut before leading the both of them to the back. The front room was set up with a small reception’s desk facing a bench and a couple of empty chairs. A poster on the wall detailed a balanced meal and another encouraged children to wash their hands. Both posters looked dated and Sakura noted that the meal one was incorrect—likely from over twenty years ago.

“Come on, Shizune’s in the back.”

Sakura followed Ino down a narrow hallway, past two doors with frosted glass to the back room where a mirrored layout to the one from before was set up. Only instead of an empty reception’s desk, this one had a young woman with chopped black hair and wide coal colored eyes sitting behind it.

“Look who I found!” Ino cried, pulling Sakura into a one armed hug. “I brought you the best doctor ever and she’s agreed to work for us! Look, look, it’s Sakura and she’s even cuter in real life.”

Sakura felt her ears go red at the praise and had to cough to ease her heart back into a normal beat. “Shizune?” Sakura stepped forward, extending her hand in practiced professionalism. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, thank you for extending the occupancy.”

“Sakura Haruno,” Shizune exclaimed, standing up to meet the woman and shake hands. “You can just in time. We’re so happy to have you and I can tell you’re probably exhausted, but if you don’t mind do you think you could take a look at one of the boys? I just had to send him away but I can call him back. They got into a row and this one needs stitches. Oh, I’m so sorry I couldn’t welcome you properly. This must be a terrible introduction to our sweet town.” Shizune’s voice sounded almost as frazzled as her expression. Poor woman looked like she hadn’t slept in days.

“Of course. No, let me wash up real quick. Where do people go for medical attention in the absence of a doctor?” Sakura was already dropping her coat and backpack onto a nearby chair and reaching to knot her hair back; It was barely long enough to pull back. Absently she noted the time. It wasn’t even noon. Who gets into a fight so early in the day?

“Kiba’s sister is the vet, so he’ll go to her, but I think she’s out for the afternoon. Hang on here, I’ll call for him,” Shizune explained, grabbing a whistle off the coat rack and slipping outside on a jog.

Ino groaned from behind Sakura and deposited the duffle on the waiting bench. “Really? Kiba? Of all the idiot monsters who could steal your time away from me. I’m going to kill him.”
“Please don’t, I kind of want to be impressive on my first day here. Which room do I use?”

Ino moved to show Sakura the correct room and even helped find some of the items Sakura would need to treat someone for stitches. Sakura pulled her scarf off and left it by the patient’s table to wash up while Ino explained she had to get back to the parlor but would be back in an hour.

Sakura was still at the sink when she heard Shizune guide someone in, chastising them about fighting. She heard someone lay down with a heavy sigh and then Shizune was heading back out the door. “I need to call his mom—oh Ino, you can help me, come here….”

Sakura shook her hands free under the turned off faucet and grabbed a pair of gloves, feeling something new come over her. She was in her element, she was a professional, and she was about to treat her first patient at her new job.

“Kiba?” she called, stepping into the room. The young man on the table looked up at her and she could already see he was in considerable pain. His pupils were blown and his breathing was labored.

And Shizune sent him off looking like this?

“I’m Dr. Haruno and I’ll be treating you. Please excuse me but I’ll need you to remove your shirt to get to the site.” Sakura could see where he was bleeding most and didn’t like to admit there was more than one area to treat.

With a grunt the man started to pull at his shirt and Sakura helped him out of it. He hissed when some of the clotted blood peeled away and Sakura bit her lip in sympathy.

There were several sites that needed attention, but all of them were long drags down his chest or arm, looking more like claw marks than the evidence of a ‘row’ as Shizune put it. Kiba was about her age too, he wasn’t a teenager. Or if he was a teenager he was one of the best physically developed teenagers she’s ever seen. In any other setting Sakura would be ogling.

“I’m going to clean these areas first and then give you something for the pain before stitching you up.” Her voice was soft but authoritative, the way one speaks commands to a frightened animal.

Sakura moved to prep the area and at the contact Kiba flinched under her, gasping from the touch of cold cloth on skin. Sakura noted how his hands tensed and his nails grew. His growl was guttural, like that of a wolf’s. His eyes were shut but when he blinked down at her, trying to focus, Sakura saw narrow wolf like pupils. His bones wanted to shift under his skin, poking up against the skin, but he wouldn’t let them. With a strain Kiba hissed and the bones settled back into place.

Sakura made an effort to work quickly to minimize his discomfort. She came back with the painkiller and was grateful to see he didn’t jerk at the sensation and his nails were back to normal.

Needle and thread ready, Sakura prodded the widest gash and was about to begin when Kiba grunted loudly.

“No, not those. String…wrong.”

“What is that?” Sakura asked, worried that he might have an allergic reaction to the thread she didn’t know about. That would be rare, but not impossible. Would Shizune tell her this? Was Sakura missing something?

“I’ll heal too fast. You need to use the…dissolving ones.”

“Kiba, some of these marks will take weeks to heal. You’re not going to heal so fast that—”
“I do, I just need to—wolfsbane was in the water. I’m not healing because of that. I—I’ll pass it out of my system in a day and then I’ll be better.” He grunted, squeezing his eyes and looking away. “Dissolvable stitches.”

Sakura looked back at her needle and string before going back for the thread that didn’t last longer than a week. “Another werewolf do this to you? These wounds look fresh, but you were probably fighting before the sun came up, huh?”

Kiba swallowed, looking down when he saw her thread her needle through the wound, pulling his skin back together. “I would have been fine by tomorrow. Blood loss is all.”

Sakura snorted, working faster. “Guys are guys no matter what, eh? You probably think you could survive anything with just a nap.”

“No…I eat food for helps too,” Kiba shot back, slurring his words a little. His head swayed when he tried lifting it so he let it fall to the table with a dull thunk. “I’m not a werewolf either…we’re lycans. The only werewolf in town’s been dead two hundred years thank you very much much…mu…much.”

He groaned a little bit and turned his face into the table, straining for something. When Sakura heard him breath in deep she looked up to see his face squished into the mess of her scarf. Her hands were bloody and busy pinching and stitching his skin back together, otherwise she would have pulled her ugly old scarf away and hidden it in embarrassment. It had little miniature figures from an old cartoon show she liked as a child. Not the sort of thing a doctor wore. Kiba seemed to like the feel or smell of it though, so she let him have it.

“Well, I’ve never treated a lycan or a werewolf before, but I think I should be able to manage if they’re all as well behaved as you. Thanks for not taking my head off earlier.” She said before mentally kicking herself. Sakura inwardly groaned, remembering how her sass was the last thing most patients wanted to hear.

*Bedside manner, bedside manner, bedside manner.* The chant helped her focus.

She was on one of the last major wounds when Kiba turned his head and looked back down at her. “Are you Ino’s girlfriend pen pal?”

It was enough to make her laugh. She needed to rethread her needle anyway, it was fine to talk back now. “I’ve been her pen pal since third grade, yeah. How did you guess?”

“You smell like her letters.”

Sakura winced. “I’m sorry. I’ve been hiking. Don’t hold it against me.”

*Itssss a good smell.* Kiba’s words were a mess. “You still have Samus?”

Sakura smiled privately at the memory. Her German Sheared from childhood had been a popular topic in her letters to Ino for the first few years. “No, she died of old age. She was twelve.”

“Sorry.”

Sakura looked up over the stitches to see Kiba was watching her. His eyes were still a bit glassy looking, and she didn’t doubt that had something to do with the pain he was being numbed against as well as anything else that might be in his system. At least they weren’t wolf eyes.

“Thanks. It’s been several years but I miss having a buddy around the house. I kind of miss having a
house period. Um, do you have dogs?” *Bedside manner, bedside manner, bedside manner.*

“Yeah, lots.”

“Tell me about them.”

And Kiba did while Sakura cleaned the cuts on his arm and dressed them. They were too small for stitches but still needed to be treated. More than needles Kiba seemed to really hate anything cold on his skin, making cleaning a pain. Sakura prodded Kiba by asking him about his sister’s dogs and that was enough to keep him from growing fangs again.

Eventually she finished with the young man but didn’t like the idea of letting him go home, so Sakura offered him a cot in the next room and gave him some water to drink, a health bar to help replenish the iron lost, and dimmed the lights. He balled up her scarf under his head and laid down, likely to sleep, but maybe to rest.

Now it was time to see his file and ferret out Shizune for some answers. Maybe later she’d worry about the variety of patients she should expect if they all came in as abnormal as Kiba, but for right now she was mentally congratulating herself on what was important.

Shucking her bloody gloves into the trash, Sakura eased the door open with her hip, reaching to undo the knot of her short hair when the fully suited figure of a finely trimmed man with inhuman eyes greeted her in the lobby. He smiled at her the same moment Shizune did, but *his* smile was different.

“Sakura Haruno?”

Sakura nodded, forgetting to correct him about the ‘Dr.’ title she was so proud about.

“We’ve heard so much about you. Welcome to Pompeii.”
“And you are?” Sakura asked, raising her brow.


Sakura whistled. “Federal agent, huh?” She turned her gaze to Shizune. “Quite the warm welcome.”

“It’s nothing like that!” Shizune promised. “Some agents are stationed here permanently as liaisons for our more…unique townspeople.”

Sakura nodded. “So, the government knows about Pompeii? That’s…comforting.”

Tobirama smiled, slow and sensuous. “The government as a whole has no idea about Pompeii’s situation. They just believe it’s an auspicious lumber town.”

Sakura eyed him up and down, frowning slightly to herself. There was something…inhuman about him.

Otherworldly.

“But you know,” Sakura said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, I know,” he replied, large slanted eyes focused on her.

Sakura nodded briskly, understanding full well the subtext of the conversation. “Well then, it’s been a pleasure but I need to move into my new home. Shizune, Kiba is still in the back, resting up after his ‘row.’ When he wakes up, will you see him out?”

“Of course,” Shizune said, her smile full of embarrassment. “I’m afraid we haven’t been too courteous to our newest town member at all. Please, head home. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Sakura bit her lip, eyeing the woman. She looked absolutely exhausted. Sakura stepped up to her, wrapping her in a loose embrace.

Shizune stiffened in shock.

“Thank you for your help, Shizune. Actually, I think I’ll stay around the office a bit longer and get some things situated here. Someone should be coming by today or tomorrow with some of the new supplies…” Sakura trailed off, grinning wearily as she broke the hug. “Well, I should probably be the one helping them bring the stuff in.”

“Are—are you serious?” Shizune asked, eyes wide.

“Of course, please get some rest,” Sakura said.

Sakura nearly fell when Shizune lunged forward, wrapping Sakura in a tight hug. “Thank you, thank you!” she said, expression bright. “I’ll be back by tomorrow morning at 7:00 AM on the dot!”

Sakura watched as Shizune raced from the building, laughter filling the air.

“I’d no idea anyone could be that happy about a break,” Sakura muttered.

“Shizune has been worked into the ground in the past few months,” Tobirama explained. Sakura
jumped, surprised to find him still there. “With doctors basically walking through a revolving door around here, she’s been overworked.”

“Are clients here really so difficult?” Sakura asked, thinking of Kiba. It hadn’t been hard at all but she wondered what the other denizens of the town would be like or even what they were. “Everyone I’ve met so far has been wonderful.”

“The clients aren’t difficult, aside from those Uchiha assholes,” Tobirama said, voice low and eyes thunderous. Sakura wondered what the story behind that was and why the name “Uchiha” sounded so familiar… “No, it’s mainly the paperwork. Everything gets thrown out of order from each of the doctors coming in and leaving. They’ll start moving paperwork around and never finish it. It’s driving Shizune crazy.”

“Good to know,” Sakura said, eyeing the little office to the side. “Everything is done on paper? No computer entries?”

Tobirama snorted. “You’ll undoubtedly discover that the people around here aren’t too keen on updating. Certainly they have smartphones but most…they aren’t exactly tech-savvy.”

Sakura sighed, scratching her forehead. Another thing to add to the ever increasing list of things to do. “Alright, good, great. I’ll just…” She trailed off, shaking her head.

Tobirama, picking up on her desire to be alone, cleared his throat. “Well, I need to head out, I’ve a meeting with my partner and I can’t be late…”

“Nice to meet you Agent Senju,” Sakura said. “I suppose I will see you around.”

“Indeed,” he replied, large liquid eyes all too keen.

“And Agent Senju?” Sakura called as he started to leave. “It’s Dr. Haruno.”

Sakura flipped through the pages, increasingly frustrated. There were documents dating back before the 1700s and some were even written in what appeared to be Norse runes.

Sakura shook her head in disgust, tossing them aside.

No wonder Shizune was nearly dead on her feet!

Sakura had thought the paperwork was backlogged maybe a few years, not a few centuries!

Sakura rubbed at her eyes, unable to ignore the headache pounding through her skull. She’d been at it for hours now and Ino had yet to come back by. Sakura remembered the crowd at the salon and knew she was undoubtedly busy.

After all, Ino was the best hair stylist in town.

At least, according to her letters.

“Dr. Haruno, right?”

Sakura turned, flushing when she realized that she was sprawled among a flurry of confidential papers.
How unprofessional.

The man before her had curly dark hair and a broad nose. His eyes were a bright, brilliant scarlet. He donned a wide grin as Sakura scrambled to her feet, running fingers through her unruly hair.

“Shisui Uchiha,” he greeted, grabbing her hand and shaking it firmly. “I heard there was a new doctor in town and, well,” He chuckled, “I had to see if it was true.”

“Word travels fast in a small town,” she replied, bemused. She was used to New York, where everything was fast-paced except the news. Sakura had a curious feeling that she was in for a bit of a culture shock.

“Gossip fuels the town,” Shisui replied. “Besides, you’re the biggest news around here since Hashirama turned into a tree in the middle of traffic three years ago.” He shook his head. “That was a worthwhile headline. We spent days uprooting and moving him. But this, this is even bigger news.”

“I’m not sure if I should be flattered or terrified,” Sakura said drily, thoughts lingering on the tree incident. “Should I be expecting more guests today?”

“Maybe, but probably not today. Most everyone is still at work,” he said with a slight shrug. “As you can see, I am actually still on duty.”

Sakura eyed his badge and uniform. “Now, I don’t know much about police aside from what I see on Brooklyn Nine-Nine but don’t you normally have a partner?”

His expression turned sheepish. “I, well, I sort of gave him the slip.”

Sakura laughed. “Really? I feel bad for your partner.”

“Aw, don’t be like that, Dr. Haruno! It’s good training for him in tracking and surveillance. Really, I’m just helping him in the long run,” Shisui said, pout clear upon his face.

“Is that what you consider it?” a soft voice inquired.

Sakura and Shisui jumped, turning their gaze to the door.

A tall, slight man stood there, wearing the same fatigues as Shisui. He was incredibly similar in coloring to Shisui, though his hair was smooth and straight and pulled back into a low ponytail. His brows were furrowed and, though he wore no expression, Sakura had a feeling he was upset.

“I’m guessing this is your partner?” Sakura asked, chuckling when Shisui cursed under his breath.

“Itachi Uchiha, at your service,” the man greeted, red eyes warm. “I see you’ve met my cousin already. Please, don’t allow his rudeness to color your opinion of the other Uchiha.”

“I’m Sakura Haruno, doctor and apparent town novelty,” she replied, shaking his hand. “Your cousin isn’t too bad.”

“It’s actually a good thing you came here Shisui,” Itachi said. “You need to have that injury treated.”

“Itachi, that happened over a month ago!” Shisui protested frantically. “It’s totally healed up!”

Itachi snorted in derision. “What about the family flight the other day? You kept flying in circles like a complete dolt.”

“I was… I was showing off!” he blustered.
Itachi rolled his eyes, looking to Sakura for support.

“Allow me to take a look,” Sakura said, voice soft. She ignored Shisui’s betrayed expression and Itachi’s smug smile. “Just a look to see if there is a problem.”

Shisui sighed heavily and Sakura knew she’d won.

“Is it alright if Itachi joins me?” Shisui asked. “I have to prove to him that I actually got the treatment.”

“Of course. Follow me,” Sakura said, leading Shisui down a corridor into one of the rooms. She glanced in on the room where Kiba had been sleeping and saw he was gone.

As was her scarf.

She frowned at the open window, reminding herself to stop in at his sister’s veterinary to retrieve her scarf at a later date. For now, she had another patient.

Itachi sniffed lightly and frowned. “Kiba Inuzuka was here?”

Sakura blinked, struggling to keep doctor/patient confidentiality without showing her shock.

Itachi smiled. “Don’t worry, you didn’t out the boy. We actually were the ones who stopped the fight earlier. We also have an enhanced sense of smell,” he said, tapping his nose. “Most yōkai have enhanced senses.”

Sakura nodded. “Good to know,” she murmured, adding that to her growing catalogue of supernatural quirks. “You can pick out individual people?”

Itachi shrugged lithely. “Not always. If it is a townsperson I’ve been around before, then usually.”

“I suppose that’s really helpful when dealing with crime,” Sakura said.

“It can be,” Shisui said. “It can also be a real bitch. Sometimes you learn a little too much if you know what I mean.”

Sakura flushed. Be professional, she reminded herself. “Of course. Ah, we’re here. Shisui, if you’d step on that scale for a moment.”

He nodded and obliged her.

Sakura’s eyes went wide. “You…this can’t be right!”

“What’s wrong?” Itachi asked, red eyes spinning in alarm.

“I think the scale is broken. It’s saying you weigh fifty-two pounds! That’s less than your average seven-year-old weighs!” Sakura said, tapping the sliding stick of the scale. “Do I have to get this replaced as well?”

Shisui laughed, low and rich in his throat. “Not quite. You see, I’m tengu,” he explained. “I probably should have mentioned it earlier.”

“Tengu,” Sakura murmured, “as in a bird yōkai?”

“Just so,” he said. “We’re all really light, you know. We have to be, in order for our wings to work.”
Sakura nodded. “So, this resembles your weight the last time you had a check-up?”

“Well actually, I weighed forty-nine last time,” he said. “Must be putting on some weight.”

“Well, as long as it’s healthy…” Sakura said, voice trailing off.

“It is,” Itachi assured her. “In fact, you should probably expect most Uchiha to come in under the average on the scale. It’s our nature.”

“Good to know,” Sakura said, writing down the weight on her clipboard. “Alright, Shisui, if you’d take a seat, I’ll check your blood pressure and heart before taking a look at your arm.”

“What happened to ‘just a look?’” Shisui asked, laughing even as he complied with her instructions.

“You haven’t had a check-up in over six years,” Sakura said primly. “Might as well go ahead and get it out of the way.”

His blood pressure and heartbeat were normal, though his heartbeat did seem elevated.

*Must be because he’s a bird yōkai,* Sakura thought, scribbling something out on her clipboard.

“Alright, now let me take a look at your arm,” Sakura said.

Shisui nodded, raising his right arm.

Sakura took it, pressing her fingers into the different joints. Shisui didn’t so much as wince.

“Are you sure there’s an issue?” Sakura asked. “I’m not finding anything right now.”

“It might only be apparent in his non-henge form,” Itachi said, eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “That’s how he was first injured.”

Sakura turned her gaze back to Shisui imploringly. “Would you mind changing forms?”

Shisui flushed slightly, clearing his throat. “Really you should take me out to dinner first, but I suppose.” He began unbuttoning his shirt and explained, “I can do a partial transformation right now. Long sleeved shirts like this would only get in the way.”

Sakura nodded, taking in his toned chest. How did he weigh only fifty-two pounds? It didn’t seem humanly possible.

Then again, he wasn’t human.

Sakura watched in fascination as feathers began to sprout along his arm. They started at his clavicle, spiraling down his shoulder and arm. Thick, luscious, black feathers covered his entire arm.

The wing was *huge,* spanning nearly seven feet. It filled the already cramped room.

Sakura watched as his fingernails sharpened into talons, ready to rend and pierce flesh.

“You keep your hands?” she asked, startled.

“Oh course,” they replied in unison, looking at her incredulously.

“How else would we be able to do anything but fly in this form?” Shisui said, wincing as his shoulder pulled.
“You are hurt,” Sakura said, moving close.

Tentatively, Sakura ran her fingers over the soft feathers, searching for the meat of his shoulder. She idly noticed that his arm was bent differently, now that it was a wing. Her fingers ran over a raised spot.

“It feels like you have yourself a pretty nasty bruise right here,” Sakura said, keeping her fingers gentle as she sized up the shape of his injury. “You’re bruised down to the muscle.”

“What would you suggest?” Shisui asked. “I need to be able to fly.”

“I’m going to prescribe you some medication,” Sakura replied, still rubbing the wound. “Are you able to take an adult dosage with your weight?”

“Our metabolism takes care of it,” Itachi said quietly.

Sakura nodded. “Alright. I’m going to give you a muscle relaxer and I suggest taking some painkillers such as ibuprofen for the next few days. It should decrease the swelling and the muscle relaxer will keep your shoulder from tightening in flight.” Sakura wrote something down on a slip of paper. “Take this by the pharmacy and it’ll be taken care of.”

“Thank you, Dr. Haruno,” Itachi said and gratitude was clear in his expression. “Madara would have killed Shisui if he was this graceless on our next flight.”

“It’d have been fine,” Shisui grumbled. His expression lightened as his wing shifted back to an arm. “Thank you though.”

Sakura nodded. “Of course. Thank you for stopping by.”

Itachi suddenly laughed and it sent a pleasant shiver down Sakura’s spine. “Shisui, you’re molting!”

“I am not!” Shisui squawked indignantly, face red.

Sakura glanced down at the floor, taking in the mass of feathers that littered the ground.

“Don’t worry, we’ll take care of it,” Itachi said, opening a window and sweeping his arm over the pile. The feathers flew into the air as if carried by wind, flowing out the window. He grabbed a still protesting Shisui by the collar and dragged him toward the door. “Send the bill to the Uchiha estate; it will be handled.”

Sakura nodded, watching as the duo left the building. It certainly felt like there’d been a whirlwind. She shook her head, heading back to the filing room to organize a little better.

“Sakura!” a melodic voice rang out.

“Welcome back, Ino,” Sakura said, turning to greet her friend.

“Did you have a busy afternoon?” Ino asked, cornflower eyes inquisitive.

Sakura chuckled. “It was certainly eventful. How was yours?”

Sakura listened with good cheer as Ino regaled her with tales of work and her harrowing encounter with a Medusa client as she began locking up.

“She’s a regular certainly, but she always wants things done in a certain way,” Ino complained,
trailing behind Sakura as she closed windows and turned off lights. “She’s always wearing sunglasses.”

“Doesn’t she have to though?” Sakura asked. “I thought looking into her eyes turned people to stone.”

“Humans. It turns humans to stone. Doesn’t affect us in the least. Well, I mean there’s an unpleasant sort of tingling sensation and my toes do go numb…” She shook her head. “Still, it’s rude.”

Sakura laughed. “So what if she’s peculiar? You’re the best hair stylist around, I’m sure you have it under control.”

Ino stopped walking and Sakura turned to her. Ino was wearing a serious, unreadable expression.

“You really think so?” she asked. “You think I’m the best?”

“I’m sure of it,” Sakura said.

Sakura found herself with an armful of Ino as the girl threw herself into her arms. Sakura hugged her back just as tightly, glad to finally be able to interact with her childhood friend in a real, tangible way.

“You know, I’m thinking of getting my hair cut soon,” Sakura said. “I’ve got some bad dead ends…”

“Say no more!” Ino exclaimed, eyes sparkling as she pulled away. “If I can handle dead end snakes, I can definitely give you a hand.”

Sakura covered her laughter with her hand. “What would I do without you, Ino?”

“Die. Most definitely,” Ino said, linking arms with Sakura. Sakura fumbled with her suitcase. “Are you ready to head up to your apartment? I bought some groceries for dinner.”

Sakura’s stomach growled on cue. “That sounds fabulous.”

“Just be warned,” Ino said as Sakura organized her desk a bit, “I don’t cook, like, at all. I just bought the stuff that goes in your favorite meal.”

“And how did you find out the ingredients?” Sakura teased, though she felt genuinely touched. She’d no idea that Ino cared so much about some of the drivel she’d written years ago.

“Chōji helped me,” Ino replied, sniffing. “He owns a restaurant in town. Once you’re settled, we have to go.”

Sakura shrugged. “Sounds good to me. I’d never say no to eating out.”

“So where exactly is your apartment? You didn’t say in your letter,” Ino said.

Sakura grinned. “It’s right upstairs.”

“Really?” Ino asked, surprised. “What was up there before?”

“I’m not sure. I think it was just used for storage by the previous doctors which is a shame.”

“They probably didn’t want to be harassed by anyone in town late at night,” Ino muttered.
“That’s probably true,” Sakura said. “Still, I think I’ll feel better being so close to the clinic. Shizune told me she’d cleared out the old boxes so we should be good to go.”

Sakura and Ino made their way to the very back of the clinic. Behind a locked door, there was an iron staircase, twisting along up the stairs.

“What’s furnished?” Ino asked, assisting Sakura in carrying her small bit of luggage up the stairs. “Because, I highly doubt you’ve got a bed in this suitcase of yours. Unless you had a warlock help you…”

“No, nothing like that,” Sakura said. “Unfortunately, no the apartment isn’t furnished and I didn’t really bring anything with me. I was planning on going into town tomorrow and buying a bed.”

Ino sighed, shaking her head with exasperated affection. “I swear Sakura, you’re brilliant but you’re so ditzy sometimes. I’ll come with you tomorrow. I think Shikamaru has a couch he isn’t planning on using anymore…”

Sakura fumbled for her keys, smiling as they reached a green door. Though the paint was peeling and showing the faded wood beneath, it looked cheery.

_Homey._

Sakura slid the key into the lock, freezing as electricity shot up her spine. She pulled her hand away, frowning at the door. It hadn’t hurt per say but it was odd…

“What’s the hold up?” Ino asked. “These groceries aren’t going to cook themselves!”

Sakura chuckled, shaking off the strange feeling as she pushed open the door.

Within she caught sight of a small kitchen and living room. Books of all sorts were stacked haphazardly in the bare living room. The walls were a pale, neutral tone and she could see a decently sized bedroom off to the side. The balcony off the living room made Sakura smile.

She stepped inside, inhaling years’ worth of dust and old, worn pages.

She grinned, heading out onto the balcony.

The sun was setting and all Sakura could see were the other shops and pine trees.

Pine trees for miles around.

She turned back to Ino and her smile was beatific.

“I’m home.”
Sakura felt a twinge of pity for the poor people who had to use the cots in her downstairs office. She didn’t have a bed yet, but she had two decent cots and a patient table to chose from in her clinic. None of them provided sufficient comfort for a good night’s sleep. Maybe if she was drugged or doped up it wouldn’t be so jarring to her bones, but when Sakura rises in the morning before the sun is up she knows it is more so from her body’s subconscious desire to leave the lumpy bed behind and less from a habit of early rising.

Undergrad internships taught her to stay awake for days at a time. She could do more than just survive on five hours of sleep. Five hours was plenty of time for her.

That’s why Shizune found Sakura already waist deep into a mess of banker boxes filled with files from patients since the founding of the town. Two mugs of coffee were still warm on Shizune’s desk.

“What’s this?” the receptionist asked, seeing the coffee. “Is one for me?”

Sakura feels a bit lighter when she sees the other woman’s reaction. “I already had mine, those are both for you but I didn’t know how you liked your coffee so one is strong and the other is sweet. You can pick whichever one works better for you and fix it up. I brought down what little supplies I had for early mornings but I’ll admit I was pleased to see you already had a coffee set up in the staff kitchen. I didn’t bring much food with me.”

“It’s 7:00AM, Sakura. How long have you already been here?” Shizune asked in wonder, eyeing the boxes that look like they have already been looked through.

“Only a little bit longer than you,” Sakura lied in a nervous voice. She actually hadn’t paid attention to the time, but she remembered it being a dusky gray outside her windows. “I’m making more of a mess than anything though. I’m afraid I haven’t been very productive.”

“Sweet thing,” Shizune clucks, reaching forward and grabbing Sakura’s hands. “You’re doing so well already. Oh, I have such a good feeling about you. I feel as if I can finally breath again. Oh, you make me want to cry.”

“Please don’t,” Sakura laughs with a smile. “I’m not worth it.”

“Oh no, you don’t understand what it’s been like. We were so desperate for some good help. I think it’s been nearly fifty years since we’ve had a decent doctor we could rely on. It’s been one mess in a lab coat right after the next.”

“Well, I hope I can live up to your expectations. I can only promise to do the best I can. I’ll rely on your guidance from time to time with new and old patients.”

Shizune smiled and it seemed as if the shadows under her eyes were nearly gone. “Of course. Anything you need, you just ask.”

“Speaking of which…” Sakura let her words trail off as she looked behind her at the mountain of banker boxes. She would have to close the door to the backroom if anyone else walked in. “I haven’t thrown anything out, but once a patient dies we don’t have to keep their medical records. There are
some in there from the 1700’s.”

“Oh those are all active, they just don’t check in on a regular basis. Some of the older ones are terrible about scheduling physicals. You have to hunt them down.”

Shizune laughs at the idea and Sakura suspects the woman imagined Sakura hunting down a 300 year old creature in the woods with a cell phone or something equally ridiculous shouting about house calls. Sakura prays such a task never becomes necessary.

“Ah, good thing I didn’t discard anything. Still, are there really this many active patients? We legally don’t have to keep records after 8 years in this state. I wouldn’t throw them out if the person is still local, but it looks like an awful lot.”

“Some of the files are quite thorough, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. We had one doctor…actually more than one, that had a habit of keeping meticulous notes on anything and everything. I’m sure there is some rubbish in here we could throw out once it’s organized.” Shizune clapped her hands, drawing Sakura’s attention. “But first breakfast. I brought scones. Share one with me?”

Sakura had forgotten about breakfast after her power bar, but the thought of something so delicious made her mouth water. Her nod and doe eyed look was enough to make Shizune laugh. Together the pair ate in the small staff kitchen, leaving the paperwork for later.

When they had finished breakfast Shizune showed Sakura to the back of the office where the opposite receptionist’s desk sat. Originally the building was meant for a join practice with two doctors, or was it one doctor and one witch doctor? Shizune couldn’t remember. Regardless, there was no need for a second doctor just yet.

Shizune said they would set Sakura up with a pager for emergencies and someone named Minato would set her up with a way to travel back in a flash in case of emergencies. Apart from Minato Shizune said she would be delighted to handle any new introductions Sakura might feel overwhelmed with.

The morning was devoted to paperwork, a review of the most popular patient files, and taking stock of the supplies in the office.

It was lunch time when the first patient came in. Shizune had just stepped out to pick up some famous take out when an unknown stranger darkened the door. Literally.

Sakura had to stretch her head back to see all of him at once. Their doors were tall, nearly seven feet, but the man in the door filled the entryway. He was wearing a hoodie and sweatpants paired with running shoes. The hood was pulled low over his face as he bent his head to see into Shizune’s desk. When he found it empty he frowned.

“Sir?”

He looked up, shocked to see someone in the opposite corner of the room. Sakura put down her papers and stood from the small waiting table where she had been spreading out old files. “Can I help you? I’m Dr. Haruno.”

“You?”

Sakura wasn’t sure what she was expecting, but when his voice cracked like a boy’s in puberty she was sure that wasn’t it. He didn’t seem to be expecting that either, since he shrunk back in the
doorway, hunching his shoulders.

“Do you need medical assistance? Shizune will be back in a few minutes if you just need to speak with her, but I’m more than willing to help if you’ll let me.” Sakura pointed to one of the open rooms with a table. “You can walk on in.”

He nodded, swallowing before stepping inside. Hesitantly, he reached behind him and pulled the door shut. He coughed again before following her into the room and standing awkwardly in front of the bed. Sakura pulled a clipboard off the wall and clipped on a form for visitors. She had become good at filling them out.

“I didn’t know there was a new doctor in… I mean I heard, I just didn’t know you were a…”

Sakura raised a brow, hoping he didn’t say what she thought he was going to say. “A what?”

He ducked his head, tugging the hood down further. “You’re so tiny.”

Sakura almost grinned. “Ah, I guess I do seem tiny.” She looked down at the chart. “Could I get your full name for this, please?”

“K-kisame Hoshigaki.”

Sakura mouthed the syllables of his name before dating the page. “Thank you, I’ll run you through a few basic check ups if you don’t mind. Height, weight, eyes and all the good stuff.”

Kisame followed direction beautifully. He slouched when she asked to measure him and it took a chiding remark for him to pull himself up to his full stature but other than that he was a model patient. He seemed nervous around her the way a man would be with small children or fine china. He was careful and considerate of her space and tended to keep his head low.

“You said you were having trouble breathing, can you please remove your hoodie so I can listen to your lungs?” Sakura asks, setting the clipboard to the side to handle the cords around her neck that make up the stethoscope.

She hears his breath of hesitation before he ducks his head and pulls his hoodie up over his back and off. He pulls it neatly into a ball and sets it down alongside him on the table, still refusing to meet her eyes.

*Bedside manner means you shouldn’t outwardly ogle the hunky men, right? Sakura mentally panics.*

Kisame was likely the most physically fit man she had ever met in her life, and she’s met a few personal trainers. Kisame is so well toned Sakura almost forgets to note the true color of his skin, a gray blue that’s more blue in the proper light. There are other things to note too. On his ribs under his arms are cuts. The same cuts are on his neck and cheeks, each set smaller.

*Gills*

Sakura swallows, remembering to be professional. “Have you been having trouble breathing?”

Kisame nods. “It’s just gotten worse. I think it has something to do with the lake.”

Sakura lifts the metal part to his chest and he flinches at the contact. “Deep breath now…” Kisame complies and Sakura hears something that makes her frown. “And breath out.” She repeats the process three more times, confirming her suspicions. “I do hear something wet in your lungs, likely
mucus. How long have you felt like this?"

Kisame shrugged. “A week or two, but it just started getting bad. I could stand it until now. It was
better after showers, but those don’t help anymore.”

Sakura nods, making a note in the back of her mind. “I’m going to give you a breathing treatment
before you go, but I also wanted to inspect your gills. If the water was contaminated there may be
some blockage there.”

Kisame shuffled nervously, which was funny since he was a hulk next to her. “Alright, but they’re
sensitive. Please be gentle.”

“I’ll try my best.”

Sakura started with the gills under his arms, pressingly lightly with the pads of her fingers. She noted
right away how awkwardly they closed. She would have suspected them to seal up tight when on
land since he was taking in oxygen through the nostrils and mouth.

“Did you notice your gills failing to close properly, or is it normal to be slightly yawning like this?”
Sakura asked, fingers ghosting over the site.

Kisame shook his head. “They’re supposed to seal.”

Sakura couldn’t help but feel her lips tug down. There were cotton swabs and q-tips on the counter,
Sakura reached for one before returning to Kisame’s gills. She warned him to hold still for a moment
while she swabbed the inside of his gill with the skill of a surgeon. Still, he grunted and flinched at
the intimate contact.

“You were right,” Sakura breathed, pulling the q-tip back and looking over the end. “There’s
something in the water that’s clogging your gills and keeping them from closing. Showers cleaned
them out initially but I’m guessing you didn’t scrub this area if it’s sensitive.”

“No,” he said with a harder than usual tone, glaring at a corner of the room. Sakura recognizes the
stance; he’s steeling himself or bracing for something.

“Kisame, I will need to clean out your gills before giving you the breathing treatment. I can’t do
anything for what’s too far deep, but I’m writing a prescription for that.”

Kisame swallows, dark eyes still dangerously narrowed. He reminds her of a shark with blue gray
skin and bead like eyes, glassy and black. “I understand.”

“I’ll try to be as gentle as possible.”

Kisame blinks and then stars down at her. “I’d actually prefer if you made it hurt. We-uh,-Finfolk
don’t normally touch our gills but our lovers will play with them or touch them as a sign of affection.
I know you’re a doctor and this is for my good, but don’t worry about being gentle.”

Sakura felt her ears turn a little red, but nodded sternly, remembering her job. “I’ll be quick then.”

And she was. Sakura went through a handful of q-tips cleaning out just the gills under his left arm,
and another handful under his right. After that he asked her to ignore the ones on his face since those
were able to fully seal and were likely not coated with whatever gunk she was pulling out.

“Please tilt your head,” Sakura asked, moving in with quick hands.
The gills on his neck fluttered more violently to her touch, closing around the q-tip and flaring widely. Sakura pulled back and waited for them to calm before going back and finishing the job. She didn’t miss the way Kisame held the edge of the exam table.

“Almost done here,” she breathed, pulling away from one side to move around his body for the last set of gills.

“A moment please.” Kisame swallows, wincing. “I’m just…my breath.”

Sakura stepped back and moved to throw out all the used q-tips. When she came back she came back with a glass of water for him to sip from. Kisame downed it all in one gulp, nodding his thanks.

“Kisame, do you know of anyone else who might be contaminated like this? You said it was from a lake. Are you the only one who swims there?”

“No, but I doubt Zabuza will come here unless he’s really dying. Haku didn’t seem as bad, but he’s a merrow, not a fin folk. Those lightweights always did have better filters.” Kisame chewed the edge of the plastic cup and Sakura noticed how sharp his teeth were, like razors. He had the mouth of a shark, truly.

Kisame caught her stare and his eyes went wide. He turned his head to the side and hunched his shoulders again, the way he had with his hoodie. “Sorry,” he gruffly muttered, not looking her way again. His cheeks tinged a shade of purple. “I know my coloring is odd.”

“Is that such a bad thing?” Sakura asked, worried about his apology. Had her stare been too impolite? Should she be apologizing?

Kisame shrugged. “I’m not very popular for it. Zabuza doesn’t look as menacing, but we’re both fin folk. We’re famously frightening to behold.” He sniffed at her, nostrils flaring. “Little things like you aren’t typically our biggest fans. You’re super delicate after all. I’m pretty sure my whole hand could wrap around both your wrists. Doesn’t that unsettle you?”

Sakura bit her lip. “Sorry, I didn’t know that it should, but I’m a doctor and I’m new so I guess I don’t see things like that. I mean, yeah you’re substantially larger than I am and you could crush me if you wanted to, but so could a car, and I still like cars…still want a car. And besides, I think you’re selling yourself short. You’re no one I’d run screaming from, not by a long shot.”

Kisame slipped a chuckle. “Oh, and who would you run screaming from?”

Sakura forgets her little mantra about being professional with a good bedside manner. “Honestly, Polo Moms. It was terrible in the city. They’re so bored and have nothing to do while their perfect child is out on the polo field so they make up a headache story and sit in our office complaining about it. They’re so entitled about it too, just trying to get our drugs and speak to whoever’s in charge. I’d run from those. I used to work in retail, I know the type.”

“Ugh, you really are new, aren’t you?”

“I said that, didn’t I.” Sakura waved her q-tip in the air between them. “Ready to finish up or should I complain about my life some more?”

Kisame inclined his head, stretching his necks so his gills flared open. He didn’t brace so much or look like he was fighting her when Sakura moved to clean out the last of his gills. If anything he seemed more relaxed. She even noticed his eyes wander the room freely. The shape of his shoulders softened as Sakura pulled the last bit of mess from his gills.
“That should do it. How’s breathing?”

“Still rough, but better. I feel the difference.”

Sakura nodded, looking pleased. “I’m going to get you set up with a breathing treatment and then process the paperwork. I think Shizune came back a little while ago so she’ll help me out. Also, I’d like the know the name of the lake where you first noted the contamination.”

Kisame rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s the only lake big enough to swim in around here, Icarus lake.”

“And you said there was someone else who was having the same trouble breathing. I’d appreciate if you’d encourage him to come in so I might treat him as well. It’s not good to let this stuff, whatever it is, sit in your lungs. It could turn into a much more serious infection.”

Kisame swallowed. “Yeah, but like I said, Zabuza likely won’t want to come unless Haku or I force him. He’s stubborn and doesn’t like things or people he doesn’t know. Heck, the only reason I came in was because of the crows.”

Sakura blinked, momentarily lost. “Crows?”

“Yeah, that or ravens, I forget which ones Itachi uses. But there’s a bunch outside that are keeping watch, so the Uchiha must value this place or trust you or something. I thought it would be worth coming in because I trust one of their guys with his judgment of character.” Kisame grinned wide and his teeth were a mess of edges. “The last few quacks weren’t worth spit.”

“But you’ll come back to me if there’s an issue?” Sakura asked, fighting to keep her grin from overtaking her face as pride swelled in her chest. She liked knowing she did a good job.

“Yeah, I guess you’re alright princess. I’ll even see about dragging my buddy in here for you sometime soon.”

Sakura wrinkled her nose. “That’s Dr. Princess Haruno thank you, I worked well and hard for that title, don’t forget it.”

When Kisame laughed it nearly shook the room.

Sakura set Kisame up with a breathing treatment that would cycle for seven minutes while she stepped out to see what happened to Shizune. The dark haired woman had a file folder for Sakura and a warm styrofoam box full of breaded chicken tenders and cheese fries.

“Are you trying to send me to an early grave with such amazing food?” Sakura hisses, stealing a fry for herself before closing the lid again.

“I told you it was amazing. Oh, and I ran into Ino along the way. She’s bringing a couple of friends by later with a…couch was it?”

“That sounds like her.”

“I told her I’d help you guys set up. You haven’t had the chance to properly settle in have you? I noticed you slept on the spare cot.”

Sakura blushed bashfully, feeling like a child next to the older woman. Shizune seemed like the type of woman to spoil others. She had the aunt vibe more so than the mom vibe. Still, Sakura adored the doting. “I’m still waiting on some things I ordered to arrive. I know my address now, but don’t feel
like you have to do anything else. Seriously, you need your own time off. I doubt one early release day is going to be enough.”

Shizune smiled wide. “Trust me, having you in there has done wonders for my heart. I feel easy knowing you’re here now. And you’re treating Kisame, that’s a feather in your cap you know.”

Sakura shifted the weight of her body from one leg to the other, making a mental note to ask Shizune what she meant once Kisame was on his way. “I’m just happy I’m able to help. I’m terrified for a day when I’m at a loss for how to fix someone.”

“You’re going to do just fine, Sakura. You want to help people, you don’t know how big a deal that is right there. Everything else will come to you and I’ll be here with files and files in case you ever need that support.”

“Speaking of support,” Sakura looked at the watch on her wrist. “I should go unhook Kisame. Don’t eat too much of my food, I’m starving.”

Sakura helped Kisame out of the breathing mask and handed off her prescription note, instructing him on how often he should take his tables and what he should and shouldn’t eat or drink it with. He grinned before leaving, his credit information already on file, promising to bring the other in if they needed it. He nodded to Shizune but saved a wink for Sakura before ducking through the doorway to the outside.

The rest of the day was uneventful until Shizune left and Sakura had the office to herself to explore without looking too nosy. She didn’t get far before a knock at the front of the office, the abandoned half, had her sprinting to the door. Ino was there with a slightly worn looking section piece and a tired looking young man.

“Sakura, meet one of the laziest people in the entire world. Shikamaru, Nara Shikamaru. He’s my slave for the evening so we don’t have to worry about hauling anything ourselves, right Shika?”

The boy sighed, shoulders slumping as a groan of ‘troublesome woman’ fell from his lips. Nara waved his hand at the couch and a pair of unnatural shadows stretched over it, picking it up and moving it inside the house. Ino hummed in excitement as she watched her friend direct shadows like puppets into carrying a couch up the stairs.

Sakura told herself she wasn’t shocked, but she admitted to being impressed.

“Where do you want it?” he asked from inside her room. The couch was position in the middle of her mess.

Sakura opened her mouth to answer but Ino rushed in. “Over here, tilt it like this, and set it down behind where I want there to be an end table. Oh, this will look good with some nice wood pieces, don’t you think so?”

“I…guess?” Shikamaru huffed, moving the couch like Ino told him to. He glanced back over his shoulder at Sakura and nodded his head in greeting. “Thanks for making her happy. She has less time to bother me now that you’re finally here. Seriously, it’s been all she’s ever talked about.”

Sakura grinned back. “She mentioned you a few times. The most lazy person I know? Sound like someone familiar?”

Shikamaru groaned, scratching the back of his neck. “What a troublesome woman.”

“But that’s Ino, you know. She’ll call it like she sees it.”
Shikamaru sighed, and Sakura suspected that was his favorite thing to do. Ino finished dressing up the
couch and kicking aside some boxes before scolding Sakura for neglecting to clean or dress up her
new space. The office downstairs could wait. It’s not like Sakura needed to devote every waking
moment to her new work.

“The paperwork has been a mess for years, it can wait a few more days.” Ino stuffed a hand into her
purse and pulled out some papers for Sakura to look over. “Here, I have some business cards for
places you can visit around town. There’s a woodworker here, he’s an asshole you need to watch out
for, there’s a linens outlet here, they’ll set you up with sheets and the like.” Ino pointed out each one
as Sakura flipped through them. “Oh! There’s our grocery store, it has the best local produce, and
here’s a place where you can buy kitchen supplies. You like to cook, right?”

“Thanks Ino, this is a help.” Sakura pulled the cards back and drew her friend in for a hug. “I
appreciate it.”

Ino made a happy sound as she wrapped her arms around Sakura. Sakura could smell floral delights
in Ino’s hair and it made her want to curl up in something warm. Sakura thought about warm coco
and movies when Ino squeaked and broke the hug.

“Shoo!” Ino cried, pushing Shikamaru aside to race to the window sill and flap her hands. “Get out
of here, don’t leave these things behind you dumb birds!”

Sakura frowned at the poor raven being shooed away while Shikamaru straighten up and paid
attention. “You’re met with the Uchiha?” he asked.

Sakura nodded, remembering not to mention anything about them being clients for ethical practice.
“I’ve met two of them yesterday. They’re from the police force, they came in to say hello.”

Shikamaru smiled lazily, and the curl in his lips was more a smirk than anything. “Man, I almost feel
bad for you if you’ve only just met two of them. Still, I guess you could do with worse company. Ino
will tell you to shoo the birds away but you can ignore her, she’s just jealous.”

“Are the birds…dangerous?”

“Nah, they’re just dolts. They’ll keep an eye on the place and keep it protected like they do
anywhere. Just…if they start leaving things behind…”

Sakura saw the young man’s calculating gaze shift. “What should I do?” Sakura asked, pressing him
for an answer.

The young man sighed and went back to rubbing the back of his head. “Ah, do whatever you want,
it doesn’t matter one way or the other. They’re not dangerous and I doubt they’re being very serious
about it. Ah, Ino, I’m going. I’m having dinner with Choji and Sakura needs a break from people,
let’s go.”

Ino pouted from the window, but picked up her things and nodded, promising Sakura she would be
back and that they would find something fun to do together once Sakura got some free time.

Once the pair had exited Sakura went over to the now shut window and picked up the thing the bird
had dropped earlier. It was just a bit of copper wire, but it was twisted into a coil that caught the light
beautifully. Sakura twisted the wire at the end and hung it from the latch to the window. It seemed to
shine with the end of the day sun and that thought made Sakura’s heart thrum a little.

She would look forward to furnishing her new room and making this a place for her. Maybe some
plants would brighten it up. There was plenty of natural light for it.
Hesitantly she touched her bottom lips and breathed deep. “I’m home,” she said out loud, believing it a little bit more than yesterday.

Chapter End Notes

Stay tuned for weekly additions~
Hip hip hooray for Weird Wednesdays
Chapter 4

Sakura woke once more with an aching back. She was up before the sun again and she scowled slightly as she rubbed at the soreness plaguing her spine.

She *definitely* needed to get a mattress today, even if she didn’t get a bedframe. Her poor back just couldn’t take it.

Sakura jumped as a tapping sound filled the darkened room. She walked out of her bedroom and stared at the sight before her in slight bewilderment.

A flock of crows were gathered on her balcony, painting the white-washed floor and rails in a sea of black.

Sakura struggled to remember what a group of crows was called as she strode forward, crouching by the sliding glass door.

They seemed rather docile, truth be told and they were certainly beautiful. The one who tapped, seemingly the leader, had bright red eyes just like the Uchiha cousins.

“A *murder* of crows,” Sakura said, snapping her fingers as a smile lit her face. “You guys don’t seem too bad though. No idea why Shikamaru thought you were worrisome yesterday.”

The lead crow pecked at the glass again, tilting its head in a, quite frankly, adorable manner.

Sakura stood, wavering only a second before opening the door.

The lead crow squawked at the others and the ravens and crows began lining up in an orderly fashion. Then, one by one, they hopped up to Sakura’s feet, dropping an item there before taking off for the rails once more.

It was the strangest sight Sakura had seen since arriving.

The lead crow came last, spreading its wings and flying up to Sakura’s hand. She watched silently as it landed gently, careful not to prick her with its talons.

The crow cawed proudly, dropping something shiny in Sakura’s free hand before flying off. The other birds followed but Sakura could see them settle in on the powerlines near her house. Another murder awaited them there and they sent up a cacophony of cries.

Sakura prayed she didn’t have any neighbors.

She shook her head, shutting the door though it certainly didn’t block out the birds in the least.

Finally, she glanced down at her feet and gasped.

She was surrounded by a pile of shiny tidbits. Certainly, some of the things, like the tinsel and the confetti could be considered trash but other things, like the expensive looking watch, were not.

Sakura was most fascinated by the item she held in her hand. It was some type of reflective precious stone. She rubbed a finger over its surface, entranced by the way the light danced across it.

It was beautiful.
It also didn’t belong to her.

Sakura bit her lip, knowing that this item belonged to someone else. The stone had been cut and polished and a fine gold chain was strung from it.

She couldn’t keep it.

Sakura sifted through the items on the ground as well, drawing out the watch, a few gilt buttons, and the diamond earrings.

She wondered if she should take them to the police station.

Then again…

Sakura stepped out on the balcony, bringing the items with her. She made eye contact with the lead crow before placing the stuff on the ground.

“These aren’t mine!” she said, feeling only slightly ridiculous. “I can’t keep them.”

So saying, she went back inside. If the things were still there at lunchtime, she would take them by the station.

She had a feeling, however, that they wouldn’t be.

Sakura smiled at the collection of assorted goods left behind, enjoying the plain prettiness of them. While they weren’t worth much, they were certainly enjoyable.

Sakura scooped these up, placing them in a clear Mason jar for safe keeping.

Sakura put the crows out of her mind as she prepared for a new day in the still sleeping town of Pompeii. She dressed in more casual attire, a t-shirt and skirt, planning on heading out into town to shop as soon as other establishments began opening at a ‘reasonable’ hour.

She shuffled through her apartment, tying her hair up in a messy ponytail as she turned the oven on for a simple breakfast of toast.

She brought it downstairs with her, determined to plow through some more of the paperwork that covered her desk. She settled in, hoping that her shipment would be delivered soon.

Shizune had told her that mail was strange in the town of Pompeii and Sakura was beginning to believe it.

She really needed a business computer though.

Sakura sighed, grabbing her laptop and biting her lip. It was the laptop that had seen her through the end of high school and all the way into medical school.

While it certainly had its sentimental value, it was on its last leg.

With crossed fingers, she booted it up, crowing in success when the screen lit up.

Sakura opened athenaClinicals and grabbed the nearest pile of files.

“It’s time for this clinic to join this century,” Sakura murmured, steadily entering in the information.

She started with her most recent patients, watching the data carefully, fearing mistakes.
“Sakura, you’re here early again!” Shizune said, not sounding the slightest bit surprised. “What are you working on?”

“Medical charts,” Sakura replied, looking up with a smile. “Good morning.”

“How can I help?” Shizune asked, concern clear in her eyes. “I’m not the best with computers…it’s a little difficult to keep up with the latest technology when you’re centuries old.”

Sakura laughed her concerns away. “That’s alright. If you’d be willing to sort documents by priority patients? Those who come by regularly, those with chronic illnesses, those who have prescriptions filled…those are the patients we need to get into the computer first. Does the pharmacy keep a computer?”

“Well Chiyo makes all of the home remedies but the Aburame run the place and import medicine from the outside,” Shizune said musingly, shuffling through some of the documents. “Their youngest, Shino, seems to keep up with current trends. They probably at the very least know how to operate a computer.”

“Perfect,” Sakura replied. “Even if they don’t have a computer in there now, they could just use a laptop. I can send this program to them later, so we won’t have to send people out with slips of paper.”

“You know, not everyone is going to enjoy all the change you’re bringing to town,” Shizune chuckled.

“I’m just trying to make things more efficient and more effective for everyone,” Sakura said, expression worried. “Should I leave it the way it is?”

“No,” Shizune replied, ruffling Sakura’s hair as she placed more files on Sakura’s desk. “I think it’ll do everyone some good to have some change. Who knows, maybe I’ll even learn how to use a computer!”

Sakura laughed, fears mostly assuaged. She didn’t want to presume anything in this town, knowing that she was a newcomer and still an outsider to most. She wanted her patients to be comfortable.

“You’re dressed a bit differently today,” Shizune said, eyeing Sakura’s outfit. “Do you have plans later?”

“I was hoping to find a mattress and get it delivered actually,” Sakura confessed. “Those cots aren’t the most comfortable place to sleep.”

Shizune stood, startling Sakura. “What are you doing, waiting around here for?” she demanded. “Go!”

“But-but the charts!” Sakura protested, put off-balance by this fierce side of Shizune.

She’d thought the woman was sweet and meek but now she saw the edge of steel to her. Suddenly she understood how Shizune had survived basically on her own in this office for years.

“You need to take care of your health,” Shizune said. “I swear; doctors are always the worst about taking care of themselves! Get yourself some lunch while you’re out; take a breath. The office will not collapse in the time you’re gone.”

“What if there are patients?”
“Then I’ll handle them myself,” Shizune said and Sakura could tell she was amused. “I’ve seen patients on my own for more than a few centuries; it’ll be fine.”

Sakura huffed but, in the end, she couldn’t argue.

She made her way out the door, frowning down at the list of places Ino had given her.

_Suna’s Sleep_ was listed as a family-owned mattress company that Ino swore by.

Sakura shrugged, plugging the information into her phone and following the map that popped up on the screen.

She enjoyed getting a chance to stretch her legs and see a bit more of the town. It wasn’t too busy this early in the morning but Sakura could see business owners and employees bustling around the stores and finishing up last-minute cleaning.

It made her smile, seeing the few stoplights in town blink lazily as cars puttered past. People were beginning easy conversations, catching up on the latest gossip.

This was what Sakura loved about towns like Pompeii: the tight-knit community.

Sakura could feel the curious stares from passerby and hear the whispers of some.

Honestly, the attention could have been because of the murder of birds that followed her at a distance, but Sakura had a feeling it was because of who she was to this town.

The infamous doctor.

Still, Sakura hoped she would one day be considered a part of this town’s community.

Maybe, one day, she wouldn’t be an outsider anymore.

Once more patients began to come by the clinic, Sakura knew the novelty of her arrival would wear off and she would truly be able to settle into the culture of the town.

Sakura rounded a few blocks, keeping a vigilant eye out for the store. She found it nestled between a diner and a tattoo parlor.

_Suna’s Sleep_ was a small, tidy building with large glass windows. Sakura could see endless rows of mattresses within. The roof was done in red tiles and the storefront itself was a deep tan, the color of sand. Cacti were bunched in different sized pots outside and Sakura marveled at the colors and vibrancy.

It reminded Sakura of the desert.

She knelt by the succulents, wondering how something similar would look on her own balcony. She’d have to ask the store owner where he’d bought them.

“Can I help you?”

Sakura hopped back to her feet, grinning with chagrin at the woman who addressed her. The woman was tall, taller than Sakura at least, with blonde hair and clever teal eyes. “Ah, yes. I’m here about a mattress?”

The woman’s face lit up with recognition. “You’re the new doctor in town aren’t you?”
“That’s me,” Sakura replied, scratching her cheek. “I…well, I packed light when I moved in and now I’m starting to assemble my apartment. It’s a nice way to meet people here in town.” She stuck out her hand. “I’m Sakura Haruno.”

“Temari Suna,” the woman said, grabbing Sakura’s hand and giving it a hearty shake. “Why were you crouching when I came over?”

“My apartment is lacking quite a bit in the furnishing department,” Sakura said, following the woman through the door. “I’ve been thinking about purchasing a few plants to spruce the place up and those succulents are absolutely gorgeous.”

Temari laughed and it was a sound full of pride. “You’ll need to speak with my baby brother; he’s the green thumb in the family. He loves those cacti. Speak of the devil—Gaara!”

Sakura watched as a young man slouched out from behind the counter in the back. He was short, maybe of height with her. His hair was a deep red and his eyes were paler than mist. He had some sort of tattoo on his forehead and Sakura wondered if it was from the parlor next door.

“Hi,” Sakura said, waving in his direction. He seemed skittish, but Sakura was used to dealing with patients who were frightened of needles. “I’m Sakura Haruno.”

“Gaara,” he replied flatly, drawing abreast of them.

Sakura was taken aback by the shadows that hung heavy beneath his eyes. She’d thought that, this being a store specializing in mattresses, the owners would get a good night’s sleep.

Gaara looked like he hadn’t slept in years.

“So, what exactly are you looking for?” Temari asked, drawing Sakura’s attention once more. “Soft? Firm? Goose feathered? Synthetic? Water?” At this last one, she wrinkled her nose.

Sakura laughed, waving her hands. “Honestly, I’m not all that sure. All I know is I can’t sleep on that cot again. I’d like a full-sized bed.”

Gaara’s eyes narrowed. “What were you two discussing before I arrived?”

“Your plants,” Temari said, giving him a warning look. “Sakura here was interested in them and complimented them.”

“Oh,” Gaara said and Sakura could see the way heat rose to his cheeks.

Sakura bit back a smile.

“Anyway, Sakura feel free to try out any of the mattresses in the store,” Temari said, eyes glittering as she watched her brother. “We can deliver same day so your back can get back to normal. I need to check some of the deliveries that are supposed to be shipped out later so I’ll be in the back. Gaara, assist our guest.”

Sakura and Gaara watched as Temari made her way to the back.

“So, mattresses?” Sakura asked, trying to fill the lingering silence.

“Ah,” Gaara said, guiding Sakura further into the store. “Follow me.”

Sakura did so and he brought her around to multiple beds. None felt exactly right.
Sakura honestly felt a bit like Goldilocks, acting picky and peculiar.

She was more interested in Gaara’s reactions though.

He didn’t seem upset that Sakura was basically trying out every bed in the joint. Instead, his expression seemed somehow wistful.

_**Longing.**_

Without thinking, treating him like a longtime friend, Sakura pulled him down onto the mattress beside her.

His bewildered look was so encompassing that Sakura couldn’t help but giggle.

“I’m sorry,” she said, catching the confusion and hurt in his eyes. “You just didn’t seem like you were enjoying yourself all that much. I wanted you to have as much fun as I’m having.”

“This is fun for you?” Gaara asked, genuinely curious. “You’re just shopping.”

Sakura shrugged, laying out across the mattress. “It’s nice to take a moment to relax is it not?”

Gaara’s face twisted into a scowl. “I never relax.”

Sakura sat up, watching him. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t sleep,” Gaara said, rubbing at a circle-ringed eye. “Haven’t slept in years.”

“Really?” Sakura asked in surprise. “When did that start?”

“…When the nightmares and sleepwalking did,” Gaara said, refusing to look at her. “What a joke right? A sandman who cannot sleep.”

Sakura frowned, placing a gentle hand against his shoulder. She didn’t move when sand leapt up from his skin, encircling her wrist.

“Sorry,” he muttered, face red. “Force of habit.”

Sakura shook off his concerns. “I shouldn’t have touched you without your permission. I apologize.”

“It’s…it’s fine,” he replied. “I don’t mind if it’s you.”

Sakura smiled at him and her heart leapt as he tentatively returned it. It wasn’t a perfect smile, in fact, it was crooked and more than a little wobbly, but it was indeed a smile. It looked nice on him; suited him.

“Feel free to come by the clinic sometime,” Sakura said, keeping her voice low. She didn’t want to broadcast his condition, even if his sibling was the only one present. “I’m the new doctor. We can look into treatments if you’d like.”

Gaara was expressionless for a few long moments and Sakura worried that she’d overstepped her boundaries. Finally, he nodded.

“That would be nice,” he replied, flopping down across the bed beside her.

Sakura hummed in agreement, smile curling up her lips.
They laid out side by side for a bit, just enjoying the other’s company.

Finally, Gaara asked, “Are you ready to try out another mattress?”

Sakura leaned up on her elbows, grinning over at him. “Nah, this one is perfect.”

Gaara nodded, a smile flitting across his own lips.

“Great!” Temari boomed, making Gaara startle, his sand rising off his skin. It reminded Sakura of the way the hair raised on the back of a scared cat. “We’ll get the paperwork taken care of over here.”

Gaara’s face fell back into a thunderous scowl as he glared up at his older sister, but Temari was impervious.

Sakura laughed at the sibling antics, following Temari over to the counter.

“Alright, our brother Kankuro will deliver this later today and help you get it set up,” Temari said, ticking off different boxes on the clipboard.

“You have another sibling?” Sakura asked.

Temari laughed. “Yeah. He does our deliveries. He works at the pharmacy and the tattoo parlor and the carpenter’s.” She rolled her eyes affectionately. “He’s a jack of all trades, master of none.”

“I’ll help Kankuro on his deliveries,” Gaara interrupted.

Temari narrowed her eyes at him for a moment before her lips broke into a too satisfied grin. “I’m sure he’ll appreciate the help.”

Gaara nodded, oblivious to his sister’s look. “Good.”

He walked up to the front of the store, leaving the women behind.

“Thank you,” Temari said in a soft voice.

“For what?” Sakura asked.

Temari gestured to her brother. “For being kind. This is the first time I’ve ever seen him warm up to a stranger so fast. Gaara’s always felt isolated since he isn’t…he isn’t the same as myself or Kankuro.”

Sakura nodded, trying to process the new information. “He’s sweet,” she said.

Temari chuckled drily. “You’re one of the few to think so. Thank you for giving him a chance.” She winked. “10% discount, on the house.”

Sakura didn’t have a chance to protest.

“Sakura,” Gaara said.

Sakura turned, looking to the man. He carried something behind his back.

“Here,” he said, thrusting a pot in front of her. It was one of the smaller pots, filled with pale blue and purple succulents. “I want you to have this one for your apartment.”

Sakura grinned brightly and asked, “May I hug you?”
Gaara looked staggered but he nodded.

Sakura stepped forward, embracing him loosely around his waist. She left the embrace easy and calm, giving him the chance to pull away if he so chose.

He did not.

“Thank you both for all your help,” Sakura said, smiling at the siblings. “Please come by the clinic anytime; our doors are always open.”

Temari nodded, eyes sparkling as she looked back and forth between Sakura and Gaara. “Of course. My brothers will meet you at the address you gave later this evening.”

“Thank you,” Sakura replied. “See you later, Gaara.”

“Bye,” he replied softly, looking a little lost.

Sakura waved at the duo, heading out the door. It was nearing 1 PM and Sakura’s stomach growled. She grabbed take-out from the diner next door, making a note to stop back by later for a sit down meal.

Sakura meandered her way back to the clinic, balancing two Styrofoam containers and her new plant.

She frowned as she took in the black 1978 Chevrolet Camaro parked outside the clinic. It was in pristine condition and she frowned thoughtfully at the gold-plated rims.

Sakura shook her head, using her hip to push into the clinic.

What greeted her was absolute chaos.

There were two strangers and Kisame standing in the office. One was nearly the same height as Kisame. The other was shorter than Sakura herself.

“Stand down,” Shizune said, voice deadly. Her eyes flashed and Sakura could swear they turned a poisonous green. “This isn’t your jurisdiction.”

“I just want to see the new doctor,” the shorter man said, stance aggressive. It was obvious that he was in charge. “I need to speak with her.”

“Why?” Shizune demanded. “So you can harass her like all the other vendors?”

Sakura cleared her throat, wanting to cut the tension in the bud.

Everyone turned to her.

The taller man wore bandages around the lower half of his face and over his arms and legs. He was built like a house. Sakura could tell that his complexion was grey.

The shorter man was blond and his eyes were a bright pink. His scowl softened into an interested look as he caught sight of Sakura.

“Not what I was expecting,” he murmured, looking her up and down.

“And what were you expecting?” Sakura asked, trying not to be defensive. She didn’t like this man coming in and pressuring Shizune, even though it was apparent that Shizune could hold her own.
“From the way Kisame described you, I thought you’d blow away in the wind,” the taller man said and his eyes were amused. “It’s obvious you’re a fighter though.”

“Thank you, Zabuza,” the short man said with an eye roll. “I am Yagura Mizu. I wanted to thank you for your assistance with my man yesterday.”

“I’m Dr. Haruno,” Sakura replied, still frowning at him. Kisame waved at her, slightly sheepish. “I was able to bring Zabuza in,” he said, gesturing to Zabuza.

“Oh,” Sakura said. “You’ve been swimming in Lake Icarus as well?”

“Have to if I don’t want to dry out,” Zabuza said.

Unlike Kisame, he seemed very comfortable in his appearance, from his skin tight clothes to his rather gaudy sense of style.

“Could we speak about this in the back?” Sakura asked. “I think it’ll be a bit more comfortable.”

“They come with me,” Zabuza said, refusing to budge.

“That’s fine,” Sakura placated. “Let me set down a few things and we can head back.” Sakura walked over to her desk, organizing a few things. “Shizune, I grabbed you some lunch too. Thanks for covering me this morning.”

“No problem,” Shizune said, eyes still trained on Yagura. “Sakura, be careful.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Sakura replied, smiling at her. “Could you grab me the file for...?”

“Zabuza Momochi,” Yagura said, eyes lidded as he kept watching her.

“Zabuza Momochi,” Sakura repeated. When Shizune placed it in her hand, Sakura pulled on a lab coat over her casual attire and headed toward the back. “Follow me.”

The three men trailed behind her and Sakura went through the motions of weighing Zabuza, testing his blood pressure, and drawing his blood.

Sakura noted that his skin had a soft, slightly scaly feel to it, similar to that of a fish.

“Now for the reason you are actually here,” Sakura said, adjusting her gloves. “If you’d remove the bandages?”

Zabuza glanced askance to Yagura who nodded. “Listen to the doctor,” he ordered.

Zabuza sighed and began the process of unwinding his bandages. There were fins much the same as Kisame’s.

“This is your normal skin tone?” Sakura asked, taking her stethoscope to his chest.

“Yes,” he replied.

Sakura nodded, listening closely to his lungs. Finally, she pulled away. “Well, it seems you’re in a similar situation as Kisame. You’ve got mucus in your lungs.”

“What does this mean?” Yagura asked.
“It could be a few things,” Sakura replied, prepping some q-tips. “It could be pollution to the lake, an introduction of a new element that has these two having an allergic reaction, it might have nothing to do with the lake at all…” Sakura shook her head. “Considering that both of you are coming in with the same symptoms, I’d say it’s something in your shared environment.”

“So what do you do?” Zabuza asked, crossing his arms and flaring his gills.

Sakura had a feeling it was an attempt to scare her.

“Well, with your permission, I’ll send some sample swabs to an outside lab,” Sakura said. “They can determine the composition of the infection and help find the source of the problem.”

“Will they…will they know where you got the swabs from?” Kisame asked.

Sakura shook her head. “No, I wouldn’t risk that.”

“And will this cost the clinic?” Yagura asked.

“There is an out-sourcing and shipping fee.”

“Kiri will cover it,” Yagura said, passing her a business card with gold lettering printed on a black background.

“And Kiri is?”

“An agency,” Yagura replied softly, voice dangerous and sharp. He was purposefully vague.

Sakura nodded. “Thank you, but that will not be necessary. The clinic has funds set aside for such occasions.”

Yagura’s expression changed to shock. “You’re refusing payment?”

“Not exactly,” Sakura said. “We just have to follow regulation.” She turned her gaze to Zabuza. “Do I have your permission?”

He shrugged roughly. “Yeah. Sure. I don’t mind.”

“Now, this will probably hurt a bit,” Sakura said, remembering Kisame’s advice.

“Good,” Zabuza said, rounding his shoulders as a dull pink crawled up his neck. He didn’t want this to feel good. He didn’t want to slip up and embarrass himself in front of the new doctor.

Sakura began to clean his gills methodically, much faster today after her experience the day before. Some of the swabs she threw away. Others she placed in baggies to be sent into a lab.

“Alright Zabuza, I’m going to go up front to write you a prescription,” she said. “I will hook you up to the oxygen tank for about twenty minutes. It’ll help regulate your breathing for the next few days as the prescription kicks in.”

Zabuza nodded, moving closer to the tank. As Sakura placed the mask over his face, he grabbed her hand. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” she replied with an easy grin.

“I’m going to stay back here with him,” Kisame said, reading the look Yagura shot him. “Haku would kill me if he was left alone.”
Sakura nodded, bustling back to the front.

Yagura followed at her heels.

He remained silent, even though Sakura could feel the way he glared at Shizune. Still, he stayed near her, on her side of the office, so Sakura didn’t comment.

As long as there was no more overt agitation, Sakura would leave him be.

Yagura surveyed her desk as she pulled out her notebook of prescription pages, scrawling what was needed across it.

“Where are you from?” Yagura asked suddenly.

“New York City,” Sakura replied.

She didn’t catch the way Shizune stiffened at Yagura’s interest.

“And how are you liking Pompeii? It has to be a bit different than the city that never sleeps,” Yagura said.

“It’s been enjoyable thus far,” Sakura said, looking up. “What about you? Where are you from?”

“Me?” he asked, eyes wide and heat suffusing his cheeks. “I…well, originally, I’m from Japan.” His gaze went distant and he looked ancient in that moment. “That was a long time ago.”

“Do you miss it?”

Yagura laughed, as if she asked something funny. “Sometimes. But honestly? No. Pompeii is home.”

Sakura nodded, grinning up at him. She was unaware of the way his flush deepened.

“You know, I’m starting to feel the same way.”

Yagura nodded, shuffling his feet.

Sakura glanced down at her watch. “It’s time to get Zabuza off the tank.”

Sakura stepped into the back, releasing Zabuza from the oxygen mask and passing him his prescription note.

“Please feel free, the both of you, to come back by if you find your condition worsening,” Sakura said. “The results should be back in six to eight weeks and I’ll call the both of you if that’s alright.”

“And me,” Yagura said, tone brokering no argument.

Sakura looked to the two Finfolk. They both nodded.

“Alright, I’ll give all three of you a call,” Sakura said.

“Send the bill to the address on the business card,” Yagura said, staring at Sakura intently. “We take care of our own.”

“Of course,” Sakura replied. “If you’re ready?”

All of them moved back to the waiting room and Sakura smiled at the way the three men interacted.
with each other.

They were really like a family.

“Good bye Dr. Haruno,” Zabuza said. “It’s been interesting.”

“Dr. Princess,” Kisame said, tipping his head at her.

Yagura smirked and Sakura was suddenly nervous. He raised a slip of paper and Sakura recognized it.

The bill from Suna’s Sleep.

“As thanks,” Yagura said. “You’ve assisted my men immensely. The Kiri have your back.”

“What? No!” Sakura began but it was too late.

The three men were already out the door and Yagura’s laughter resounded in her ears.

Sakura slumped, defeated.

“Be careful,” Shizune warned, eyes brimming with concern. “You’ve no idea who’s interest you just gained.”

Sakura sighed, taking a seat at her desk once more. She opened her Styrofoam container of food and began eating the fries. While lukewarm, they were delicious.

She smiled at Shizune tiredly, pulling her computer closer to update it with their most recent client.

“Just another day in Pompeii.”
Kankuro was a riot, and a part of Sakura believed he was only so chummy and outgoing because it made Gaara all the more uncomfortable. Kankuro acted as if it was a real treat to do anything with Gaara, making the younger brother bluster and blush.

“I’m going to take this upstairs first,” Gaara ground out, glaring at his brother. He paused when he caught Sakura watching him and then ducked his head. “D-do you want to show me where you want it?”

Sakura nodded, taking the stairs two at a time until she was on the landing outside her room. The door had been left empty for the brothers to move in and out of easily. Sakura slipped in first and waved Gaara in behind her. There was a space under the windows she wanted the mattress set. A folded set of sheets sat off to the side, ready to be applied.

“It’ll be nice right under the windows,” Sakura commented, feeling a little nostalgic for when she used to have a similar arrangement in her childhood home.

Gaara surveyed the room, nodding at the cleaned off floor. “You have a lot of room here.” His eyes settled on the succulent she had put under the nearby window and Sakura watched his eyes soften. “You kept it.”

Now it was Sakura’s turn to flush. “Yeah. I…I know it’s super cheesy, but while I like plants and flowers I feel like the desert breeds are the only plants that can survive me. I remember for high school graduation I got so many flowers and even the potted ones. I tried to take care of them but they all died.” She glanced back at the succulent on the window sill. “A friend gave me a small barrel cactus in a pot apologizing for being so prickly all year long. I took care of that guy for my entire college life. It’s a nice feeling, when something stays with you for so long.”

“They are strong,” Gaara agreed.

Behind them the sun was setting and filtered gold started to streak in through the windows to the west. It made his face and hair just glow.

Sakura blinked, “Will you and your brother be okay carrying the mattress up?”

Gaara snorted, shaking his head and making his hair sway. “Kankuro is unnecessary.”

Seconds later a snake of sand slithered mid air, followed by a coil around the mattress. Kankuro was lying on the mattress with a saucy smirk, letting Gaara carry him and the merchandise to the designated spot. He winked at Sakura as Gaara set the mattress down. Gaara’s sand smacked Kankuro as it left the mattress like hands leaving a child.

“A little showy, don’t you think?” the older brother asked, adjusting the black cat hood he wore as part of his outfit. In addition to a set of all black he also came with an impressive design of face paint traced across his face. At least Sakura guessed it was face paint.

“Are you truly necessary?” Gaara asked in a droll tone, eyes half lidded.

“Yeah, cause I’m the one in charge, duh.” Kankuro hopped up and slid up alongside Sakura. “Speaking of which, my boss wanted me to ask you about the invoice. Someone already tried paying for it and we wanted to ask-“
“Don’t accept his money!” Sakura’s reaction was knee jerk at best. Both brothers blinked owlishly at her. “Ugh, no, it’s just someone trying to be welcoming. I don’t want to do anything that could be construed as taking a bribe so please don’t deposit their check or whatever they used. I have the payment already made out for you to take back.”

Kankuro smiled, causing Gaara to flinch. “Ah, no worries there. Temari is a force all on her own. She’ll turn down their payment if you tell her to. But is that okay with you? It might piss the party off.”

Sakura felt her shoulders and rolled them back, adopting the look she took on when addressing business. “That may be unfortunate, but I stand by my decision.”

Kankuro laughed. “Oh man, the old lady is going to love you. Ah, I better get out of here before I get in too deep. Gaara looks ready to murder me.”

Sakura turned and looked back over her shoulder at Gaara, but his face only flushed a brighter shade of red under her scrutiny. He looked more embarrassed than anything. Kankuro was a tease.

“Come on little brother, you can’t sleep here. Let’s leave Sakura to her rest, it’s getting late enough.”

Outside the sky was caught between the ghost of gold and budding night. In a little while the first stars would probably twinkle into view. It got dark so fast, like the sky was a drain and all the gold had fallen through to a place Sakura couldn’t see.

Sakura wrote the check and a note to Temari, thanking her for being so understanding, before seeing the boys off at the front. By the time they were out the door there was silver in the sky. Gaara turned to wave her goodbye and the moonlight caught in his pretty green eyes. Sakura nearly froze at the way he looked back at her. It was an image she didn’t believe she could ever forget.

“I hope you sleep well tonight,” she said, not knowing if he heard her.

Gaara’s lip quivered before pulling upwards. “You too.”

Then they were gone in a swirl of sand.

Sakura scratched at the seal on her underarm, hyper aware of the invisible presence that couldn’t even be felt anymore. Minato had told her she would get used to the feeling in a day or two, and if it was still bothering her after that to come see him and he would fix it for her. She didn’t doubt his words, but knew that until she got used to it, her habits would be no different than those of a child running their tongue over the absence of a tooth.

Shizune caught Sakura staring and frowned before Sakura could hide her exploration.

“I’m sorry, but if there was an emergency we’d like a way for you travel back in an instant to help,” Shizune had explained, showing off a patch of skin on her wrist that glowed blue with a matching seal before fading invisible again.”you’ll almost never have to use it, though. I’m here most of the time.”

“I’m not worried. Besides, I agreed to this, didn’t I. You’re right when you say there should be a way I can know about emergencies. I had wanted to explore the woods and maybe go hiking later on. This will give me peace of mind.”

“I’m glad. I don’t want this work to be terrible for you, but I’m afraid our clients have been some of the more colorful variety.” Shizune laughed and shook her head, black hair slapping her pretty pale cheeks. “Don’t give up on us, you’ll warm up to the oddities before you know it.”
“What, oddities? What ever are you talking about?” Sakura mock asked, batting her eyes comically. It was enough to make Shizune laugh. “Don’t worry, Shizune. I’m from the city, remember? We had plenty of colorful characters and scenarios to deal with. I’m used to being adaptive.”

“I believe you. I just worry for when you met some of the younger ones.” Shizune tapped the underside of her chin and Sakura remembered how old the woman claimed to be. ‘Young’ was a pretty vague term. Was 100 years young? She exhaled and shook her head like an exasperated mother. “Some of these kids….really.”

“Shizune?”

The called upon woman looked up, eyes wide and waiting. “Yes?”

Sakura felt her cheeks flush. “Sorry, I just thought for a moment you sounded like a mother. I was wondering if you’ve seen a lot of these kids grow up.” Sakura bit back the part where she wondered if Shizune ever had kids of her own. It seemed too forward of a question for only days of knowing each other.

“You could say that. I helped bring many of these kids into the world,” Shizune answered, looking down at a pile of files. The names of several were recognized: Kiba, Ino, Shikamaru…even the Shino boy’s name was there. “A lot of the citizens found our city to be a safe haven for them, but others don’t know any better. Pompeii has been their home for as long as they can remember.”

Sakura looked away from her own folders and files to stare out the window to the lobby. It was a nice day, cool and sunny. “It’s a good place to call home.”

“I think so too. I’m so excited for you to see more of our Pompeii. Speaking of which, you said you never finished your errands from the other day. Where else were you going to go?”

Sakura still had the cards Ino had blessed her with. “I still need things like a table in the kitchen and maybe one for in front of the couch. Once I get a bit more foot traffic I’ll spring for some nice bookshelves too. The room upstairs is actually a lot bigger than I thought it was the first time I saw it. It just seems to grow.”

Shizune laughed but Sakura wasn’t sure why.

“Well, you have your first scheduled appointment coming in for a yearly. After that there’s nothing on the books. Would you like to take off for lunch and shopping? I’ll call you back if you need it. I think it’s fair since you’re giving me the day off tomorrow when I haven’t even finished training you on our method of running.”

Sakura suddenly felt like she was in an odd position. She was younger, less experienced, and almost a fish out of water in comparison to the rest of the town, but she was still the one with the fancy title calling the shots. She set the hours, she did the main labor, she was the superior. But at the end of the day, she felt like she would always look to Shizune for guidance. Would that change? Would there be a day where she felt confident to stand alone? “This isn’t my first rodeo. I think I can manage one day on my own, and you need a day to yourself. Let me know if you want to take late lunches or extra breaks. The paper can wait.”

Shizune smiled knowingly. “If you say so.”

Sakura first ‘regular’ came in right on time and Sakura had the file prepped and read so she knew what the expect. She ran through the exam for the Jorōgumo and sent the spider woman on her way with a clean bill of health and a hearty ‘thank you’ for the appointment.
Shizune shooed Sakura out the door and nearly cackled at the wounded look Sakura sent back over her shoulder, too hesitant to fully enjoy herself when she knew there was work she could be doing. It was as if the people of Pompeii didn’t care about deadlines. When you live for centuries, it made sense not to care about such a trivial thing, Sakura figured.

“First food, then furniture.”

There were plenty of places to go for food in Pompeii, but Sakura wanted someplace close to where she would be looking for furniture. One of Ino’s cards had a small map with several chain locations and another had a recommendation for a small sit down place. Between the two of them, Sakura knew she should be quick and efficient, but the sit down place had all day breakfast and it had been too long since she had a hearty breakfast stocked full with sugar.

Sakura shuffled the cards and then picked one with her eyes closed. When she opened her eyes she knew she had made the right choice.

“Waffle Shack it is.”

Sakura didn’t doubt the Waffle Shack had been inspired by otherwise named waffle houses across the nation, but apart from the frame of the building and menu, there was nothing not unique about the place.

Stepping through the front door the windows that should have been full of sun were cut and framed to see into what looked like different patches of drifting space. Sakura blinked, looking sideways out a window to where a nebula pulsated like a glittering green purple bruise across a starry sky.

Another sky was choked with pastel clouds. Another was heavy with rain and Sakura could smell the moisture from that window when she got too close. The hair on her arms stood up when she felt the echo of lightning electrify the cells of her skin. She didn’t know she was staring until a girl with red hair and redder eyes brushed past, huffing about leaving the isle clear.

Blushing, Sakura turned away from the window and set her purse down at the silver bar in the center of the room. Most of the booths were taken and she was only one person, she didn’t want to possibly deprive another group of seats together.

A woman with blue hair and sharp cheekbones high enough to be an angel’s was taking orders. She nodded to Sakura before writing something down and passing it back behind her into the kitchen.

Sakura could see the menu written in chalk across the blackboard overhead, but already knew what she wanted before reading anything there.

“What can I get for you, hun?” the woman asked with a voice like honey. “Something to drink?” Nothing she said was rushed or oddly paced, but Sakura felt like her words went on forever.

“Water please. I’d also like to order the Cinnamon Roll Waffles with Cream Cheese Glaze.” Sakura saw the gold badge with the woman’s name. “Thank you, Konan.”

The blue haired woman blinked and looked up, a bit off set by the sound of her name. A second later she smiled easily. “I’ll have those out for you in a few minutes.”

Sakura smiled and nodded her thanks. Konan turned to clip Sakura’s order to a metal wheel half between the kitchen and the outside when something loud fell on the other side of the room, just out of view. There was a ripple of displeasure among the other diners, but no one else moved or said anything against it.
Moments later a boy in black leather and jeans tumbled over himself, slamming against the wall. His lip was bleeding as it curled into a scowl, blue eyes sharp and piercing. Sakura felt her breath catch in her throat while she watched him rise to his feet. His nose was bleeding too. The boy, dressed in chucks, faded wrangles, a white tee, and a black leather jacket stood, running both his hands through his black hair, only for it to fall back into his face, black and wild. His cheeks were scarred like whiskers.

The boy looked around him and saw the stares and cursed. He grabbed a napkin off someone’s table and wiped the blood off his face. His eyes caught on hers, snagged like a cloth on a barb wire. His eyes were the heart of a flame, a flickering blue that would burn the whole world down one day.

Sakura heard him curse as he stalked out, footsteps pounding. The door slammed behind him and Sakura heard the far off motor of a motorcycle rev.

“Pein,” Konan’s voice was sharp enough to make Sakura flinch. “I told you no fighting.”

Sakura looked behind her to see a man, tall and willowy, stalk out from behind the corner that Sakura couldn’t see beyond. His jeans were black and slim, seeming to go on forever as he stalked over to a free spot at the bar. He sat down one stool away from Sakura, as far as he could be from anyone and everyone else.

“That wasn’t fighting, that was teaching a pup a lesson. He knew better.”

Konan’s voice was full of frustrated exasperation. “I don’t support your claims, you know. He can come here if he wants.”

The man made a laugh and something like fog seeped from between his lips. Konan shook her head and slipped back into the kitchen.

Sakura didn’t know why, but she didn’t want to be caught staring, so she turned her head back and glanced sideways at the window with the never ending rainfall, the one that smelled like wet soil and air. Still, in the glare of glass she could see another angle to the man’s face, the angle that was decorated in metal.

“Here’s your order hun.”

Sakura turned around to see Konan drop off a plate of sweet smelling waffles with her water and a jar of maple syrup. Sakura smiled to herself before reaching for her silverware and digging in. It was so delicious she was almost able to ignore the weight of a person’s stare on her, watching her as she ate. Halfway done, Sakura swallowed and set her fork and knife down.

“Can I help you?” Sakura turned and faced the man with a face full of artful metal.

He didn’t say anything, just continued to stare at her openly as if it was his right. It was the first chance she had to see his face straight on, and she noticed a few things beyond just the piercings down the bridge of his nose. Firstly, his face was strikingly handsome with sharp lines and definitions that drew her eye in, in, in. His eyes were gray storm clouds lined multiple times around a knifepoint pupil.

The same mantra that kept her cool in a heated situation and made her an excellent doctor kicked in and Sakura mentally willed herself not to be shaken. She pretended she had a job to do. When there was work that needed her she could steel herself through anything.

“Do you need something from me?”
The man named Pein leaned back in his seat, hanging off the bar stool like it was a throne and not some dinky hunk of metal and plastic. His eyes were wide enough to see all of her and Sakura had to fight to keep her back straight. She could see he was dressed like a punk with black nails, leather bracelets, and a black torn tank held artfully together with half a dozen oversized safety pins the same color as the metal under his lips. His hair was a mane of trimmed amber hair.

“I’m still deciding…” he breathed, fog ghosting over his lips. She felt like she was sinking in his stare. “It’s been awhile since someone looked me in the eye without flinching. Are you stupid or brave?”

“I’m hungry,” Sakura quipped before turning back to her waffles.

“Are you some other pagan god I don’t know about? You’re new here.”

Sakura chewed another mouthful of waffles. “What?”

Not caring for personal boundaries he reached out and held her face, forcing her to turn back towards him. It was easier to look at him this time since she was glaring. “It’s been so long since we were worshiped. Do you remember it?”

Sakura slapped his hand away. “I don’t know a lot about this new town, but Shizune told me not to be rude by making assumptions or asking a person what they were.”

“You don’t want to hear your praises sung in song and blood?” his hand reached out and ghosted through the loose strands of her hair, making her scalp tingle. He hummed and his throat made a sound like far off thunder. “Hmm, maybe I could be your altar boy, no?”

“You’re too familiar.”

“I’m Pein.” He said it as if it explained everything. It didn’t do anything other than make her more frustrated with the individual who was, admittedly, too good looking for his personality. What a tragedy.

Sakura dragged the last piece of her waffle through the syrup before biting it off her fork. She reached into her purse and grabbed a fistful of bills that would cover her meal and a tip. She pinned the bills under her plate and then pushed it forward before slipping off her stool and standing.

“I’m Doctor Haruno. If you need medical assistance you can see me at my office during business hours. Otherwise make an appointment with Shizune.”

Pein’s eyes glowed silver. She thought they almost turned purple but decided that was a trick of the light. “You’re the new doctor.”

Sakura saw Konan watching the exchange from the other end of the bar. Sakura raised her brows and pointed to her money, mentally hoping she was okay to just walk out. Konan smiled and nodded to Sakura before waving. Sakura turned back to Pein.

“Like I said, I’m the doctor here. If you need me you’ll know where to find me, otherwise I’ll take off.”

“You’re not going to ask anything of me?” His head tilted all on it’s own, eyes searching hers. “You can, you know. Ask and I’ll favor you, healing god.”

“I’m not a god, I’m just a doctor.”
His hum was in her bones and she felt it shake her when he chuckled. “I don’t think you’re just
anything.”

“Regardless, I’m not your lesser. I don’t need anything from you.”

When his lips curled the metal studs above his chin caught the light wickedly. “I think I’m looking
forward to having a new doctor in town.” He leaned forward but Sakura refused to step back or give
up ground. “Don’t think you shouldn’t expect me sometime soon, healing god.”

The fog from his breath wasn’t unpleasant when it ghosted over her skin, but she refused to let him
see that. Sakura swallowed but decided she was done and needed to move on. She she nodded curtly
in his direction before turning towards the door and leaving the Waffle Shack behind her.

The Wood Shop she wanted to visit was unexpectedly closed with a handwritten sign on the door
stating the ‘master’ would be back by 4:30. In the windows were tables and chairs on display, but
puppets and dolls hung on string dangled behind glass.

Sakura made a mental note about the time and headed back to the office to help Shizune with files
and do her own work on the computer. Closing came at five but Shizune went home at four, giving
Sakura plenty of time on her own to work as she pleased and even slip away for a change of
clothing. Something more casual was in order for the evening trip. Skinny jeans that fit over her hips
like hands and a graphic tee with a Ghostbusters logo paired nicely with her jacket.

It was starting to cool down and she knew it would be colder by the time she made it back, so Sakura
hurried, locking the doors behind her on her way out. The Wood Shop wasn’t far to walk to from
where her office was, and Sakura noted that her place of work was ideally situated in what was
probably close to the center of the hub of Pompeii. It made sense. Access to a doctor was important.

When Sakura got to the Wood Shop she saw that the sign in the door was gone, but bits of the paper
still stuck to the tape remained on the glass door, as if someone had torn the sign down angrily. But
if someone had, there was no sign of them when Sakura stepped in. Turning around she took and
saw that, while the outlet was large enough to be cluttered with a variety of furnished pieces, it was
empty of customers.

Sakura let herself stroll, knowing she only needed two or three things for the time being. Her room
was abysmally decorated and lacked a great many things, but until more people started showing up
she had to watch what she was spending.

Sakura looked and found a number of coffee tables, some of which she just adored. There were
plenty of dining tables to choose from as well. She double checked the prices but saw that for custom
work everything seemed pretty inexpensive. If it was so cheap she might be able to spring for a
bookshelf or two.

Sakura took a couple of photos and sent them to Ino, asking for her friend’s advice. Ino agreed with
her on the end table but wanted Sakura to get a bigger kitchen table for hosting. Sakura wanted the
tiny one meant for two (maybe four) people. The larger one would be more practical if she wanted
friends over for dinner, but it would mean the bookshelves were a for sure no go until much later.

That’s fine.

Sakura agreed on the two pieces and then turned to find the manager or teller but there was still no
one to see. She went up to the counter and checked every corner of the store to no avail. The only
cue she had was the not so far off humming of something outside.
There was a door leading out that Sakura followed, noting the sound from earlier growing louder. A final door to the outside wasn’t fully closed but was thick enough to muffle sound. Sakura shoved it open and froze on the threshold, blinking rapidly.

‘Don’t ogle,’ she mentally screamed as she observed the sign before her.

There was a log standing upright being carved into an animal of some sort. He was wearing protective goggles, loose wrangler jeans tucked into combat boots, and nothing else. For being cool enough for a jacket, his naked upper half was glistening with sweat as he angled a chainsaw into the wood.

Don’t ogle, don’t ogle, don’t do it, be a professional, don’t ogle.

It was hard when he was that tone and a redhead.

The chainsaw was too loud to be heard over so Sakura started to edge into the man’s line of vision, keeping a good distance away from the carving and the chainsaw. There were wood chips and debris flying out she didn’t want to get hit with. She knew when he saw her, since he switched his saw up and pulled it away from the wood. The man took a step back and pushed up his goggles into his hairline. Sakura though he had sort of a baby face.

“What?” he barked almost rudely.

“I-I wanna buy your stuff. This is your shop, right?” Sakura replied, pointing to the door she came out of.

The redhead looked between her and the door and then cursed. “Where is the blond idiot?”

Sakura swallowed. “The shop’s empty. Should I come back?”

He groaned, setting his chainsaw down and pulling off his gloves to throw onto the ground next to it. “I’m going to kill that little punk.” He stomped up to the door and then stopped to look back at her. “You said you wanted to buy some stuff?”

Sakura was quick to follow, suspecting he wasn’t the type of guy that liked to be kept waiting. His steps were heavy as he traversed ahead of her and turned sharply behind the teller’s counter to grab a mobile scanner. When he turned she was there.

“What do you want?”

Sakura showed him the coffee table she wanted as well as the kitchen table. He scanned both and began punching in information to be processed.

“Do you get a lot of traffic in here?” Sakura asked curiously, feeling awkward for just standing around in front of a shirtless guy who wouldn’t stop scowling.

He looked up sharply at the question, his scowl already in place. “Where have you been, living under a rock? No one shops here.” He squinted at her, almost making her take a step back. “Hn, you do look out of place.”

“I’m the new doctor. You haven’t heard the latest gossip?” she tried to joke.

“No.”

“Oh.”
He went back to typing in more information while Sakura bit her bottom lip. “Um, if you ever need a doctor just ask for Dr. Haruno. That’s my name in case you need to know.”

“I don’t.”

Sakura stopped biting her lip, and quit her worry about being awkward around the still shirtless man with a boy face. “You don’t think that’s an arrogant thing to say? What if you get sick with something you never had before?”

The redhead stopped and looked up slowly. “You really are new, aren’t you?” he dryly commented. He held up a hand that was seamless and smooth and perfect and then brought it down so fast Sakura heard bones snap when it hit the nearby table. Not once did he blink.

Sakura cursed, rushing forward to help, holding his wrist and keeping it from jostling as he stared blankly on. “Wh-what is this?” Sakura’s hands almost trembled as she saw into the interior of Sasori’s body. No blood seeped, but from his wooden bones a less recognizable emptiness stared back. “You’re hollow.”

“I will never need a doctor. I am not like the others. This isn’t even a real body, no matter how smooth the skin is stitched together, it’s still a witch’s dream.”

Sakura still didn’t let go of his hand. “Aren’t you in pain?”

“I feel nothing. There will be an additional charge for delivery or do you have a means of picking it up yourself.” He blinked. “What are you doing?”

“Your bones are out of order, I’m putting them back into place,” Sakura whispered, staring down at the hand made up of torn skin and broken wooden bones. Little parts, the parts that made up the joints in his wrist and fingers were slid too easily out of place, but Sakura coaxed them back with a careful eye that had reshaped too many broken people.

“Why?” he asked, sounding neither upset nor delighted, only curious.

“I’m a doctor, it’s what I do.”

“But I am not someone for you to treat. I’m a homunculus you silly girl. An alchemist grew me up in a little pot and put me together like this. I’ll live forever.”

“How sad.” This time she did feel him react to her words, it wasn’t a sound, but a flinch of his body.

“I will live forever, that is art.”

“Maybe, but that sounds lonely. Regardless of how long or short true art is, what value is there in it if it’s never acknowledged by others? Ah, there, I pushed the last bone back in. Hold still.” Sakura pulled a bandana out of her back pocket and began to tie it around his hand. The open parts of his flesh were covered by red and white stripes. “It matches your hair.”

“I didn’t ask for your help.”

“Well you got it, tough darts. You’re just going to have to deal with being helped every once in awhile without asking for it.”

“I never ask for help.”

Sakura rolled her eyes. “I figured as much.”
He watched her a moment before saying, “My name is Sasori. If you want to address a check you
can just fill it out to Sasori Akasuna. You may come back for future purchases at a discount after
your initial transaction. I will remember to honor any future purchases with the discount.”

“Sasori,” Sakura tried his name out. “Thanks. I think I’ll come back for some more pieces.”

“You said you were new. It was logical to assume you would need other items. Also, if there is no
blond idiot at the front I am usually creating commissioned artwork out back. Find me there.”

“Isn’t that what I already did?” Sakura joked, watching as his scanner processed and spit out a thin
invoice. “Hey, I didn’t tell you if I was picking it up or getting it delivered.”

Sasori ripped the thin invoice free with his bandaged hand, blinking at the renewed mobility before
turning the paper around and handing to Sakura. In the section for shipping the extra charge had
been waived. “The Wood Shed will deliver. Don’t feel the need to leave your address if you are
staying above the clinic. We all know well were it is located.” He paused and then rushed to add in a
almost haughtier tone. “My grandmother manages the pharmacy.”

Sakura remembered hearing a name before from the Suna siblings, a woman Kankuro worked for,
someone from the desert…Chiyo! She nodded, theorizing that Sasori was also likely familiar with
Temari and her brothers. “Eh, really? Wow, then it really is a small town.”

Sasori nodded before looking down at his bandaged hand. When he lifted his head his eyes seemed
to open for the first time since their meeting. His eyes had always been open, but it felt like, to
Sakura, that he hadn’t actually seen her until that moment. She doubted it was longer than a couple
of seconds, but his stare went on forever.

“Yes, small enough that we will see each other again.” He never looked away from her. “Please look
forward to my deliveries and thank you for your business.”
Sakura bit her lip, reviewing her grocery list once more. Most were the basic items: milk, eggs, bread, and such. She also wanted a roast to cook for dinner. She hadn’t had the chance to cook since the move and she missed it.

Sakura crossed the road, looking up at the local grocery.

It was a rather small building made of fading pink brick with ivy curling up the sides. There was a square concrete parking lot but very few cars were present. The neon yellow sign flickered with the name *Kit’s*.

Sakura hummed mindlessly to herself, taking a rickety cart and heading into the building.

She was immediately greeted by the sight of flowers. Here were all types of flowers, some she recognized and others she did not.

These were the ones she approached, examining them with a critical gaze. Her undergraduate research was on the use of plants in modern medicine. She’d never seen anything like these flowers.

“May I help you?” a voice inquired.

Sakura whirled.

The man before her was, in a word, odd. He was split down the middle in two distinct colors, black and white. His eyes were a bright yellow and Sakura found herself reminded of poisonous flowers. What was most interesting of all was the plant that grew out of his shoulders. It was a massive fly trap and the feathery feelers along the bud trembled in the air.

Still, Sakura was born and bred as a New Yorker and she prided herself on being unfazed.

“Yes actually,” she replied. “What kind of flower is this?” She pointed to a starkly orange bush.

“I bred it,” he said with a blank look. “Dumbass.”

He looked faintly embarrassed about the outburst, brows furrowing but Sakura didn’t mind. She’d treated a few patients with Tourette syndrome during her clinicals. Besides, she’d met quite a few rude patients in her day.

“You bred it?” she asked, almost starry eyed.

“Yes,” he replied warily, watching her with confusion. Zetsu wasn’t used to talking to other people, ever. “Why?”

“They’re amazing!” Sakura said, curling her fingers through the leaves. “Do you keep notes?”

“Y-yes,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Could…could I see them sometime?” Sakura asked, clasping her hands together. “I mean; I understand if you’re keeping them a secret.” Her face fell. “That’d make sense actually, especially if you’re trying to—”

“It’s fine,” Zetsu interrupted, voice quiet.
Black Zetsu was absolutely silent. No one gave him any attention. Everyone was terrified of him. Mito gave him a part-time job as a florist but that was mainly out of pity. Besides, she knew the truth.

He couldn’t hurt anyone, even if he wanted to.

“I can’t believe I haven’t introduced myself; I’m Sakura and I’m new here in town,” Sakura said, offering him her hand. “I’ve been hoping to start a garden, maybe I could purchase some plants from you?”

“Sure,” Zetsu said, looking nonplussed by the hand offered to him. He took it gingerly in both of his, shaking it lightly. He hadn’t touched another person in…well, he couldn’t quite remember. “I’m Zetsu.”

“Is it alright if I stop by tomorrow?” Sakura asked, green eyes sparkling.

Her eyes reminded Zetsu of mountain fields full of tall grasses blowing in the wind. They were beautiful.

She was beautiful.

“Hey there!” a grating voice said, breaking Zetsu’s concentration.

He turned, glaring down at the mayor’s obnoxious son. Murderous rage filled him only to abate immediately thanks to his curse.

“Hi,” Sakura greeted, narrowing her eyes on him. He looked strangely familiar. “May I help you?”

“Actually, I was hoping to help you,” he said, blue eyes skittering over Zetsu’s face before sliding away again. “Naruto Uzumaki, store manager. I know you’re new in town so I was hoping to show you around.”

Sakura looked over at Zetsu and shrugged hopelessly with a smile. “I’ll be back by tomorrow to get that journal. I’m the new doctor in town; feel free to drop by the clinic at any time.”

Zetsu waved back to her, frown curling his lips as he raised a hand to the fly trap around his neck.

Maybe…

He shook his head, turning back to his plants.

There was no chance really.

“Are you insane?” Naruto demanded, leaning into her as he whispered angrily.

“What?” Sakura asked, moving away from the man.

“Zetsu! Why were you talking to him?”

“We were just having a conversation!” Sakura replied incredulously. “He was nice, rather shy.”

Naruto blanched. “I—I—what?”

“He’s a fantastic curator of plants as well,” Sakura said. “Why are you so upset?”

“He—haven’t you heard?” Naruto asked, guiding her over to the produce section. “Zetsu is a cannibal.”
Sakura looked up into his serious expression and couldn’t help herself. She burst into laughter, sides aching.

“Really? A cannibal? I admit it’s a pretty original rumor but don’t you think he would be, I don’t know, stopped? If he were actually a cannibal, the law enforcement would have done something about it.”

“Well he isn’t a cannibal now!” Naruto sputtered. “Someone did some voodoo on him centuries ago and restricted his cannibalism.”

“Okay,” Sakura said, still not really believing him. Small towns cultivated rumors like fine wines and most were flimsy and false. “So why does this matter now?”

“He’s…he’s creepy!” Naruto exclaimed.

Sakura stopped walking and crossed her arms. “You know; I think I’m going to head to a different grocery.”

Naruto sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said. He did look contrite. “I was just concerned. We never really interact. I’ve never heard him talk before.”

“You manage the store don’t you?” Sakura said, raising a brow. “You don’t even talk to your employees.”

“It’s a family-owned store,” Naruto said. “My matriarch…er…great-great-great-grandmother allowed him to have space here at the store. I don’t really run that part of the store. Or the meat department. Mito-sama has a habit of taking in strays.”

Sakura smiled slightly. “She seems like an interesting woman.”

Naruto snorted. “Oh yeah, she’d love you. So would you like me to show you around?”

Sakura laughed, looking at the signs above the different aisles. “I think I can handle it.”

Naruto pouted a bit. “W-well, I need to do something with the cauliflower anyway. Yeah, I need to…organize them.”

Sakura smirked, shaking her head as she picked through the fruits and vegetables. She chafed a bit at his overprotective tendencies but honestly it was more than a little amusing to watch him bumble around, trying to watch her without overstepping his boundaries.

He kind of failed at it, to be completely honest.

Sakura smiled to herself and gathered the ingredients for a salad before moving on to the bread goods. Naruto followed her, claiming something about “checking the freshness of the bread.” And he managed to follow her throughout the rest of the store, making up inane excuses as she went through the meat department, the frozen foods, and the dairy section.

Finally, Sakura made her way to the check-out, laden down with all of her favorite foods.

“I’ve got it!” Naruto exclaimed, pushing a brown haired teenager to the side.

The younger boy didn’t seem to mind and instead watched Naruto with wide, admiring eyes.

Sakura shook her head but headed to the kiosk anyway, handing her cart over to Naruto.
He rang her up and Sakura bit her lip at the number on the screen.

Damn.

She didn’t know if she could afford it.

Naruto took note of her expression and entered a few things on the ancient cash register.

Her cost went down.

Sakura turned accusing eyes on Naruto but he just shook his head.

“Look, I was a royal jackass, both to you and to Zetsu. This is my way of apologizing,” he said, eyes crinkling up at the corners. “I’m action oriented.”

Sakura smiled at him before swiping her card through a card reader that, frankly, looked like it came from a time long before computers…or televisions.

“Thank you,” Sakura said, calculating the difference in her head. Then she pulled the correct amount of cash out of her wallet and handed it to him, “but it’s unnecessary.”

So saying, Sakura gathered her groceries and headed out the door.

She hurried along, wanting to get back to her apartment before any of her goods spoiled. Sakura passed by a few people who seemed familiar to her. Many waved and Sakura did her best to return it with a bright smile.

Sakura managed to jostle the back door of the office open, heading up the narrow staircase to her new home. She placed her groceries on the ground, pulling out the key and pushing into the apartment.

She never tired of entering her new home.

It was a little haven to her, her safe place and refuge.

The apartment didn’t quite feel totally lived in just yet, but the cactus that Gaara gave her went a long way to making it homey.

Sakura brought her groceries in and began to sort them, filling the empty cabinets and refrigerator space.

She hummed to herself, grabbing the few ingredients she needed before turning on the oven.

Nothing happened.

Sakura kneeled down, fiddling with the knob before cursing a blue streak. The knob wasn’t even attached to the oven anymore and, from what she could see, there was no other way to turn it on.

Sakura groaned, sitting down and leaning her head back against the cabinet opposite the stove.

She’d left her toolbox in New York, knowing that it wouldn’t make it across the country. She traveled lightly and now she was regretting it.

Sakura forced herself to her feet, putting everything away before grabbing the list of places Ino graciously made for her.
She nodded as she found the hardware store on the page. Beside the name *Jashin Machinery*, Ino had something scrawled in her flowery writing, “Warning: owner is abrasive, rude, and rather obscene. Approach at own risk.”

Sakura scowled thoughtfully, flipping through the other pages but finding no other hardware shop available.

She wasn’t in the mood to deal with a high-strung asshole but she *really* wanted to cook dinner…

Sakura sighed, grabbing her keys, phone, and purse before heading out the door, ready to get in, get out, and start dinner.

She trudged down the street, waving lethargically at the people she passed. Sakura enjoyed the fact that basically everyone walked where they needed to go, just like in New York City. However, unlike New York, people actually took the time to see their surroundings, to greet the passerby.

It was…nice.

Sakura felt her frustration ease as she crossed a few streets, eyes darting across the different signs on the storefronts. Sakura noticed that all of the signs were beautifully crafted, obviously handmade, perhaps by someone in town.

Finally, she stopped outside of her destination. The storefront looked much different from what she expected. For one, the walls were an electric purple. For another, there were some pots seated outside, filled with mushrooms growing in concentric circles.

It gave Sakura pause as she tried to remember what creature was associated with these types of circles…

The door opened, breaking Sakura’s concentration.

“Are you coming the fuck in or are you going to stand there like a dumbass?”

And that must be the owner.

“Just admiring the scenery,” Sakura said drily, stepping inside.

She was a bit surprised at the owner’s looks. He was tall and lanky with a bit of a baby face. He was dressed in leather and black. His skin was smooth and porcelain pale. He wore his silvery hair long and slicked back. His bright purple eyes, which matched the walls around them, were narrowed.

He looked like he was trying *way* too hard to be dangerous.

“What the fuck do you want?” he asked.

“Is that how you treat all of your customers?” Sakura asked, unfazed by his aggression. She’d dealt with worse. “I’m surprised your business is still running.”

“She’s got your number,” a dry voice remarked.

Sakura glanced across the room, surprised to find another person present. The speaker was seated at a low table, one that seemed much too small for him and all the papers he amassed about him. He wore a face mask and it looked like he had tattoos of barbed wire running across different areas of his exposed skin. Glasses were perched on the bridge of his nose as he fiddled with a calculator.

“I’m Kakuzu,” the man greeted, acid green eyes back on his records. “The idiot’s name is Hidan.
Take nothing he says seriously; I’ll handle your transaction today.”

“The hell you are!” Hidan exclaimed. “I own this place!”

“And I helped you finance it,” Kakuzu replied calmly. “If I ever want my investment back you have to have more than two loyal customers.”

Sakura looked between the two, reading the animosity that was clearly in the air. Still, Sakura was on a mission and didn’t really want to get involved in their affairs. So she walked over to the aisles, searching for a basic toolbox.

The duo’s bickering faded into the background, the sound strangely comforting to Sakura. It was nice to be included but not intruded upon as she searched the shop.

She glanced up as the bells of the shop tinkled again.

She scowled.

Pein stood in the doorway of the hardware store, silver eyes glinting eerily.

Hidan and Kakuzu didn’t even pause in their argument, only waving distracted hands in Pein’s direction as he entered the room.

Sakura ducked down, frowning to herself.

She didn’t want to deal with Pein or discuss godhood and ancient deities at the moment.

Unfortunately, Pein’s eyes flashed in her direction and Sakura stood with resignation, moving down a different aisle.

She knew he’d follow.

And of course, he did.

“Doctor,” Pein greeted, tone making the word seem like an inside joke, like he knows her to be more.

Sakura narrowed her eyes. “Hello again Pein,” she said, body language screaming for him to leave her be.

“What brings you here of all places?” Pein asked, following her as she rifled through the items on the shelves.

“Toolbox,” she replied, pausing as she wars between indifference and curiosity. “Why are you here?”

“Hidan stocks items that are of use to myself and my powers,” Pein said, tapping his facial piercings. “He makes them special for me.”

His breath was cold as ice as it curled across her face. It reminded Sakura of early winters; the blight upon the crops. Strangely, it revitalized her, waking her up.

“That’s kind,” Sakura said, hefting a ratchet in hand and testing its weight.

She placed it into her basket before moving on.
“Hidan is an enthusiastic supporter of the forgotten gods. Unfortunately, he is devout to one alone,” Pein said, slightly put off by Sakura’s continued ignoring of his presence. Still, he remembered she was a god herself and demanded a certain amount of respect. “Should I visit you at your clinic, then? Would that be the best way to gain your attention?”

Sakura eyed him dolefully. “If you need medical attention, please do. If you just intend to harass me, please do not drop by.”

“Oh, so you’re the new doctor,” Kakuzu said, perking up. “If you need any assistance in running your business—”

“She doesn’t need your help,” Pein impatiently interrupted, strange eyes still fixated on Sakura. “She’s a goddess.”

“I am not—” Sakura began, only to be drowned out by Hidan.

“Really? What kind?” he demanded loudly, stepping into her space and scrutinizing her.

“Healing,” Pein announced smugly.

“Oh,” Hidan said, enthusiasm visibly waning. “Are you sure about that Pein?”

“What do you mean?” Pein’s eyes were narrowed and Sakura realized that he was not used to being questioned. He was a god after all.

“She seems…she seems like more,” Hidan said. “Look at the muscles in her arms; the fire in her eyes. She’s a war goddess.” He nodded resolutely. “And I should know; I’ve met quite a few.”

Sakura had given up by this point on speaking sense and reason into these men. Let them believe what they wished to believe. She had other matters to attend.

“Kakuzu, could you give me a hand?” she asked, ignoring the passionate conversation between Hidan and Pein behind her. They were arguing about…was that Ishtar?

“Sure,” he said with practiced ease, side-stepping the arguing duo and coming up beside her.

“I’m looking for the most cost effective toolbox here,” Sakura said, breaking off as he began to chuckle.

“Well, I’d certainly know that,” Kakuzu said. “What are you mainly looking for in your toolkit? Car repairs? Home repairs?”

“Home repairs,” Sakura replied, slightly distracted.

Her eyes were focused on his corded arms; the way crude, black stitches ran along them. He had stitching everywhere and Sakura had the uncanny feeling that it was the reason he chose to wear a mask. Her fingers itched to rework the threads, to make it nice and neat and perhaps less painful for him too.

“Alright,” Kakuzu said, oblivious to Sakura’s thoughts. “You’re going to want this one then.” He pulled a bright orange toolbox off the high shelf and handed it to her. “It’ll have what you need.”

Sakura nodded. “Thank you.”

“Let me ring you up so you can get away from these dumbasses.”
Sakura grinned brightly with relief. She was ready to be away from the people who kept discussing her godhood. Sakura placed her hand on his arm and said sincerely, “Thank you.”

Kakuzu averted his eyes, suddenly shy. “N-no problem. C’mon.”

Sakura followed him, snorting at the obliviousness of Hidan and Pein who continued to argue without her.

“So you work here?” Sakura asked, rubbing her arm.

Kakuzu snorted. “Hell no. I assisted Hidan in getting off the ground and I’m waiting for him to pay me back.”

Sakura laughed. “And how is that working out for you?”

“He certainly isn’t one of my best investments, but despite his idiocy he’s…well, I guess he’s a friend.” Kakuzu cleared his throat awkwardly. “He is loyal and determined. He’ll make the money back one way or another.” He scowled. “Even if I have to push him to do so.”

“So you’ve financed a few of the other companies around here?” Sakura asked, handing him the cash.

“More than half the shops in Pompeii,” Kakuzu replied with a little bit of pride.

Sakura whistled, impressed.

Kakuzu felt himself flush, removing his glasses and placing them to the side. “I know you’re the new doctor in town and I’m sure that backlog of paperwork is a bitch. If you end up needing some assistance…”

Sakura laughed, shaking her head. “While I might not be a goddess, I’ve been managing well thus far. I appreciate the offer.” She paused, taking the toolbox. “And if you need any medical attention…”

“I know where to stop,” Kakuzu said, smirk growing beneath his mask. “It’s been an enlightening encounter.”

Sakura snorted. “Or dimming, considering the company.”

Kakuzu huffed a laugh, understanding her jibe at Pein and Hidan. He saluted her lazily, watching as she sauntered out the door.

“So, Sakura, huh?” he said, glancing down with unseeing eyes at the receipts and bills that littered his table.

Maybe he’d drop by for a visit, have his stitches checked…

Sakura leaned back on her heels, grinning with triumphant pride as the oven flickered to life. She pumped her fist, giggling as she realized how ridiculous she must look. Thankfully, she was in the comfort of her own home.

She grabbed her groceries from the refrigerator, piling them on the counter and humming to herself as she set about prepping dinner.

Once the roast and vegetables were in the stove, Sakura headed into the bathroom and turned on the
faucet.

She tested the water against her skin, sighing as the heat encased her hand. She stripped off her clothes methodically and stepped beneath the spray.

As Sakura scrubbed, the stress of the day washed away down the drain along with her sweat and grime. It was nice to be able to drift, no worries about bills or backlogged forms or rowdy clients…

Still, it had to end at some point.

She climbed out, dressing in her warmest flannel pajamas. Sakura pulled her hair into a low ponytail, water sluicing down into the towel around her shoulders.

With a wry smile, she bustled back into the kitchen, removing her meal and fixing her plate. Sakura glanced at her balcony, frowning at the crows perched there. She placed her plate on a low table, moving onto the balcony to shoo the birds away.

Sakura smiled at their gifts, well used to the ritualistic way they leave them daily. She sorts through them, keeping the normally “worthless” objects while returning to them the precious stones. She sometimes had the feeling that this was some sort of test…but that was silly.

She tossed some sliced potatoes down into the parking lot below her building, smiling as the birds took wing with cheerful caws. She couldn’t help but feel attached to her feathered friends, enjoying their daily visits.

Shaking her head, Sakura grabbed her food and settled on the balcony to watch the sun set. She was a little early, but she enjoyed the peace and tranquility of the balcony.

“Ahem,” a voice said.

Sakura startled, turning to the side.

Beside her stood a man on the other balcony. He was tall and incredibly pale with long, fine white hair. His features were delicate and above his eyes rode red dots. He smiled softly.

“I apologize for interrupting your evening; I only wanted to introduce myself."

Sakura leapt to her feet, unashamed of her pajamas.

“I’m Sakura,” she greeted, offering her hand. “New residential doctor.”

“Kimimaro,” he replied, taking her hand softly. Sakura felt the fine rub of calluses against her own. “I’m the residential dentist.”

Sakura smiled up at him, leaning against the rail. Their balconies were separated by about four and a half to five feet. “What brings you out onto your balcony?”

“Just admiring the sunset,” Kimimaro murmured.

Sakura nodded, eyes turning back to red sun low in the sky. “Understandably.”

They stood in companionable silence for a long while, watching the sun set fully. The silence was only broken by Kimimaro’s rumbling stomach.

Sakura turned to him, smile softening as she caught sight of his embarrassed flush. “No dinner yet?” she asked.
“N-no,” Kimimaro said. “Unfortunately, it escaped my mind.”

“Wait here,” Sakura said, scrambling back into the house.

She threw a plate together, rushing back outside.

She was greeted by a strange sight.

Kimimaro stood on his balcony, staring with cold green eyes down at a crow. The crow looked back at him with narrowed red eyes, wings splayed widely in blatant aggression.

When Sakura stepped back onto her patio, the crow took off, circling down to the parking lot once more.

“What was that about?” Sakura asked, stretching out across the distance between them to pass Kimimaro the plate and glass of water.

“Ah, you didn’t have to,” Kimimaro said, though his smile was gratitude enough.

“It was no problem at all,” Sakura admonished. “You have to take care of yourself. People in the medical field tend to be the worst about self-care.”

“Thank you,” Kimimaro said, flush bright. “I…I really do appreciate it.”

Sakura nodded graciously, taking her seat as Kimimaro did the same.

“So, what was that about?” Sakura asked, thinking back on the odd sight.

Kimimaro frowned down at the crows in the parking lot. “Crows around here can be very possessive of what they consider ‘theirs.’ They take after their patrons that way,” he muttered in a low tone. He turned to Sakura, gaze serious. “Be careful of the crows, Sakura. They’re very intelligent.”

Sakura’s smile faltered beneath his grave tone. “I…I will be,” Sakura said.

Kimimaro’s look softened. “Don’t be too concerned,” he said, looking down at the crows and taking in the gems that Sakura refused. “You’ve done well enough without any help.”

Sakura nodded, unable to contain her unease. She stared down at the crows, shivered, and stood.

“I’m heading in,” Sakura said, smiling apologetically at Kimimaro. “This has been wonderful.”

Kimimaro nodded, strangely disappointed. “Perhaps…perhaps we can do this again.” He chuckled. “I promise you, I can take care of myself. Hell, I can even cook!”

Sakura laughed, taking her dishware back from him. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Kimimaro grinned at her, keeping his smile up until she closed the sliding door to the balcony. Then, his smile changed to a scowl as his gaze fell back to the crows.

They were there for two reasons; both as protection and as a claim.

Nothing good came of drawing the Uchiha’s attention.

And from the looks of it, Sakura had it in spades.
Sakura had been grateful for the steady stream of visitors to her clinic requesting physicals and help with their various ailments. It would mean her dangerously low bank account might see some credit instead of just debit. But all the same, after half a dozen different cases the last patient at the end of the day was one she thought she could have done without. She didn’t have the energy required to be flawlessly pleasant with a smirking pagan god. Banter, she could manage, but if he wasn’t in the mood for the back and forth wit of hers she didn’t know if she could pretend to be pleasant for long.

“Pein, I seem to be running into you all over, don’t I?” Sakura hummed, stretching a smile that had no business on her face. She was tired and in the wrong mood to humor someone who was set up to be difficult.

“Sweetheart,” he rumbled. He was softer than before, less roaring than how she remembered in the restaurant and less aggressive than he had been during his encounter with Hidan.

Sakura remembered with a snap she was a doctor and he was her patient. She didn’t have to be sunshine and roses, but she did have to give him the care he needed and deserved.

Bedside manner!

“What can I help you with today? Shizune said you refused to describe the nature of your ailment.” Sakura looked down at the clipboard in her hands and flipped up a single page to check his information on the backside. It was mostly blank. “You came here with a reason, correct?”

Pein was sitting up on the bed with his long legs dangling, crossed at the ankles. His hands were folded over the edge of the bed and with the way he stared out at her from under the hood of his brow he was more a piece of art than a man. True, he was a god, she should have expected as much. When he spoke he turned his head to let his eyes rove a bit more freely around the room before settling in on her. “I’ve been meaning to attend to a physical, but I have yet to trust anyone in your occupation with this body that is mine. At least, that was the story until you came along.”

“I shouldn’t see why that will make a difference. I’m nothing like you.” Sakura huffed setting his chart down and reaching for her stethoscope. “I think I already told you I’m not a god like you. I’m not something so lofty.”

He made a dismissive sound with his cheek from inside his mouth that sounded like a tisk. Pein sat up and began to pull at his solid white tee, peeling it up over his back to off the rest of his body. A handful more piercings lined his spine and dotted his collarbones. “Oh sweetheart….we are what we are regardless of who believes or doesn’t believe in us. If the whole world falls silent then there should always be you to speak your own existence into certainty. You must believe in your own self even when the rest of the world falls dead.”

Sakura reached to touch him with the bare metal of her device before asking him to breath deep. He flinched, biting his lip at the cold contact of her stethoscope. “Sorry,” Sakura whispered before adding, “Take a deep breath for me.”

When Pein exhaled Sakura thought she felt the forest in a storm rushing past her. She felt the mist, cool and curling, and tasted the rain when she opened her mouth to breath. A god of storms and sky and rain he was, but rain was his favorite.

“Believe in yourself,” he chuckled into her ear when she leaned in closer to hear his breathing from
her stethoscope on his back. “I’ll be your first acolyte.”

“No more talk of me,” Sakura huffed, closing her eyes as she pulled away to keep from seeing his face. She was afraid of his eyes and how they seemed to trap her. “You came here for yourself, not to speak of me and my affairs. Don’t you know your own manners, eh? You’re too bold to pry.”

“What privacy can there be between two of our kind?” he chuckled.

Sakura knew she heard thunder in that laugh and set her mind against losing her wits on him. He was in her care, and she would do her best to care for him. She checked his throat and ears, and only hesitated a fraction before checking his beautiful eyes that seemed to go on forever. She weighed him, and measured his height. He asked her if she needed to measure anything else, thumbs tugging at the hem of his pants, and she retorted that he came in for the wrong kind of exam if he was thinking about that. His reflexes were good and he seemed fine to send out on his own after a few more questions.

Each time she asked him something about his medical history he replied with a question about her, and wouldn’t answer her own inquiries until she gave in and offered up her own answers to his questions about herself.

Sakura reached out and touched the side of his face where a faded bruise discolored the skin. It was light and hard to not miss. He didn’t pull away when she tapped it again with her pen. She made a note of that.

“See something you like?” he teased.

“I noted a few old bruises. How fast does it take you to heal? You couldn’t have been so injured from Hidan’s scuffle. That was days ago.”

He frowned, slating his eyes off to the side. “You know the average rate of our own regeneration is near instantaneous. I chose to leave those marks there.”

“Why, you think they make you look tough or handsome?” Sakura queried, raising a single brow. Pein smirked at her expression.

“No, believe it or not I thought I might actually deserve his anger this time, or at least I wanted to believe his anger was justified for once. If you press me on it I’ll come around to admitting that I was actually right all along, so don’t press me on it and go asking for answer that will make me regret this humbling kindness I show the world.”

Sakura narrowed her eyes at the mark on his face and thought back to what she saw at the Waffle Shack, the boy who looked too much like Naruto who rode off on a motorcycle with an angry storm of his own in his eyes. “I won’t ask you about your own affairs. Those matters are for you to be concerned about. If you like I won’t even pester you to treat it yourself. I’ll let you keep it.”

“Oh?” His eyes twinkled. “You’ll let me keep it? I didn’t know I was without a choice in this matter.”

“You have yet to see me when I attempt to be persuasive, Mr. Pein,” Sakura chuckled with a mock smile.

There was a sharp inhale, the kind just before a gust of wind knocks you over, but it was only his breath. “I think I might actually want to see that.”

Sakura couldn’t help but smile and feel the honesty in it. Pein was fun to banter with if she allowed
herself to forget about how he shouldn’t be someone she got too close to. “And maybe you will, but it will not be today. I’m nearly through with you and after I’m done I’m out for the day. I have no intention of disturbing the plans I have already put into place.”

“Not even for myself? You do not know, how humble and devoted of a servant a god can be. Won’t you let me pull this persuasion from you?”

Sakura reached for his shirt and pressed it back into his hands. “You’re nearly finished here, don’t forget your things. The most you’ll get from me is a warning not to fight. It’s not good for anyone.”

When he sighs it’s like a sky’s distant echo of far off wind with a pinch of thunder mixed in. He’s a body full of storms and she’s only caught a peak of what he is truly made up of. “I shall be content with this for now. I scarcely believe we will be so parted for long.”

There was a coat on the back of a visitor’s chair next to the bed and he stared at it before picking it up and throwing it over his shoulders and slipping his arms through. He chuckled to himself before adjusting the material over his body once more. Sakura couldn’t help but ask.

“What?”

He smirked in reply. “I like to think of what it would look like. It’s been so many years since those gaudy days in fields and plains and valleys all for the sake of some storm ushered in on the behest of a favorite sacrifice. Back then I can recall the grader of my displays and the awe and fear I inspired. All the gods tried their best and I never tired of their own shows.”

“You miss it?” Sakura guessed. It sounded like he missed those times and days.

“Of course, any god does.”

Sakura felt suddenly aware of how ignorant she truly was of the old ways and the details of what was practical and good for people like old pagan gods. “You could still whip up a storm or a show, couldn’t you?”

Pein looks at her and it’s almost a look of disgusted offense, but not quite. It was more like the look of a child caught longing after something he had no business longing after. “Of course I could do such a thing. I am Pein.” His tone was full of lofty arrogance. “There is no such limitation on me now, but I would not be so desperate for glory days to lower myself and put on display what no one has asked for. I never go where I am not invited. That is the way of gods who still remember their long lost heights.”

His eyes are mournful to match the downturn of his lips when he looks at her and she can only imagine he is wondering why she doesn’t already know that for herself. Sakura forgets her customer service training and presses on his emotional bruise, fascinated with the different, humbled emotions crossing his face. She wants to see more. “But you wish for it, all the same.”

He blinks, looking almost unbalanced by her question. “What?”

“You miss it. You want to call down storms.”

He reaches out and touches the space between her eyes, brushing the pads of his fingers over her skin like that is all it would take back to unearth the memories and knowledge he thinks she has somewhere deep. “What creature doesn’t want what they were created for? I have never forgotten this nature of mine…thought I know many have by now.”

“It would do you good to have someone ask you for rain? Tell me what they used to offer you as a
sacrifice for the grandest storm.”

He loves this question, Sakura can tell. The way the rest of his body follows the smile on his face and in his eyes is too clear to miss. He remembers those days and it lights him up like lightning from inside a storm’s boundaries.

“They would go to the shrines and the high places, the places closest to the sky and offer me blood or maiden body…sometimes an object they had fashioned for themselves and put labor and work into was offered. My favorite were the poets though.”

“Poets?”

He nods, voice sounding far off. “They offered me songs and I took them, took the words out of their mouth and the memory from their brains to keep forever. So many in so many different languages. The titles….earth shaker, tide makes, rolling god who gathers the sky up like a cloak and paints the heavens with his brilliance, make a dawn from your storm, appease your anger on your lowly people once more. Or Walker of the heavens, tread with the fullness of your stature and make the earth your reckoning. Our enemies are around us and we are besieged. Exalted deity of the clouds, make the thunder your right hand and the lightning your left, and take them to the enemies of our land. I remember them all, every last word.”

Sakura’s face feels hot and she looks up to where his fingers still touch her brow. The heat from his fingertips seeps into her and she reaches up to touch his hand. The contact startles him and brings his awareness back to the present. “You truly cherished their words.”

“They were beautiful words.”

Sakura nods. “They were.”

She turns towards the door and waits for him to move up alongside her before opening it for the both of them and slipping out first. He follows, keeping close, as she leads them back up to the front where Shizune is waiting to manage the financial aspects of any visit.

Sasori is not expected. He stands by the far window and turns to see her coming out with Pein close to her back. She feels Pein react but can’t see what sort of expression the god man beside her makes. Sasori narrowed his eyes and shoves his hands deeper into his pockets before lowering his gaze at last.

Sakura turns to see Shizune smiling easily, ready to smooth things over before they get too rough. “Sakura, I’m glad you’re finished. He had questions about delivers for you.”

“You need not worry about myself,” Pein chuckled, looking to Shizune who flinched. “I can handle my own subordinates in the daylight and we have no quarrel with you.” He picked up his invoice and looking it over before letting his eyes slide to Sasori. “Isn’t that right, old friend?”

Sasori kept his hands buried deep in his pockets. “Of course.” There was a begrudging respect or at the very least an emotional acknowledgment of the older man’s superiority. But when Sasori speaks again, his words are a degree shy of what Sakura would consider respectful. “You’ve been absent lately, Pein.”

“I have? I saw Hidan only last week, and Kakuzu on the same day. Where has Deidara been? Your bird friend has been quite the flighty bastard. The only one I can think to depend on is dear Konan these days. Who did I miss?”

Sasori shrugged. “Itachi checked in, nothing more.”
Pein scoffed, pulling out his wallet and signing his invoice before handing it off along with his credit card. “Itachi is a dutiful, though stiff, family man not worth getting worked up over. He will come again. If that is all you may leave.”

“Sorry leader, I didn’t actually come here for you.”

Pein blinked before looking down at Sakura who was signing something else over Shizune’s shoulder before typing into the computer. Pein’s expression was blank, but his tone was a tad lowered. “And what use could you have in a doctor’s office, puppet?”

Sasori glanced downward, hands still deep in his pockets. This time he was wearing a shirt, but his jeans still seemed the same. Comfortable and functional, he had stuffed them into black combat boots that had seen better days. “Business of my own making, I’m not a customer or client or whatever you call them.”

“I ordered some furniture,” Sakura cut in. “I know you said you would have it ready this week, right?”

Sasori shrugged, one hand coming out of his pocket to rub the back of his head. “Ah, yeah. You said this week would be fine, so I dropped by today to see if you could take it tonight or I’ll come back a less busy day.”

Sakura remembered Sasori mentioning he wouldn’t be able to bring over her pieces himself until later on when his ‘other work’ cleared up. She wondered if his other work had anything to do with Pein.

“I can take it now, I don’t have any more people to see on my list for today. Do you have it in a truck or something?”

Sasori nodded, pointing out the window and then walking towards the door. Sakura followed, not caring if Pein followed after her, putting his credit card and wallet away. Sasori was in the bed of his truck pulling out the first piece and lifting it onto his back like it didn’t weight anything at all. Sakura kept back and pointed out where he could carry it. With a huff Pein came up behind the pair of them and picked up the second piece before following them both back inside and up to Sakura’s living space.

Sasori frowned over his shoulder but when Pein raised a single brow, the redhead turned and looked away, not willing to challenge the stronger man and yet still unpleased with his current lot. Sasori paused on her threshold the same way Pein did before stepping into her living space. They walked like they were inside her temple, like it was a holy place and not just her old boring home.

“It looks like this place is starting to adapt to your personality,” Pein commented, setting his piece down as Sasori twisted the new table into the perfect spot on her floor.

Sakura nodded and thanked Pein but didn’t say anything to prolong the conversation. That was fine, since Pein was looking over everything, same as Sasori. Pein seemed to be fascinated with the mason jars on her shelves filled with glitter trash from ravens while Sasori kept on staring at her succulent.

Sasori looked up, feeling Sakura’s stare. “I recognize the breed,” he finally admitted. “My cousin?”

“Eh, that’s from Gaara. You know him?”

He almost smiled, but it was harder to see emotions on Sasori’s face than Pein’s. Sasori was more doll in body than he was man. Sakura wondered how it felt for his face to pull into any sort of emotional mask at all. “Cousins usually do know each other, so yes,” he said.
“You look like cousins. You have the same red, desert hair.”

Sasori reached up and ran a hand through the mess that was his hair. “Ah.”

“Now you sound like the Uchiha,” Pein huffed, coming back into their space, standing closer to Sakura with less than a smile on his face. “I believe we are finished here. Any additional fees to Sakura may be charged to me for the thanks of such excellent care.”

Sakura raised a hand sharply, separating Pein from Sasori. “No! Hold it right there. No thank you, but I pay for my own stuff. I am not that sort of person and I would take great offense if you paid for any of this. I have my pride, thank you very much, and I am not a kept woman at any rate so you have no use buying things for me, so forget it.”

“I wouldn’t have taken his money anyway,” Sasori almost chuckled, nearly smiling for the first time in the presence of Pein who looked quite put out.

Sakura rolled her eyes. “Don’t look at me like that, I thought you were a god who was used to getting sacrifices. It’s not your place to offer up sacrifices of you own or anything else for that matter.”

“I am allowed to bestow gifts.”

Sasori seems to enjoy the way Pein looks at Sakura, like she’s just beyond his reach. How many other people move Pein to such an expression?

“Bestow something else to someone less fortunate than I. I don’t need anything else right now.” She turned to her left and inclined her head towards Sasori. “Thank you for the delivery. I’ll be sure to shop with you again in the future.”

“It’s been a pleasure,” Sasori remarked, smiling as he waved, walking out backwards. He looked up at Pein and nodded, turning around to face the door. “Coming, Leader?”

With a huff the taller male nodded and then looked down at Sakura. He seemed to search her a moment before he too, bowed and took his leave.

Sakura slept a little better that night, but in the morning it was right back to the grind with more filing and more patients.

After two in the afternoon her last patient left with a prescription and Sakura thought she would have the rest of the day to devote to filing when Shizune’s phone rang loud enough for Sakura to hear. Shizune’s demeanor shifted quickly and she stood, phone still pressed to her ear.

“Of course,” she said out loud before hanging up. Turning to Sakura she said, “That was from the Nara compound. Their son hurt his head and they want a doctor to look him over.”

Sakura stood suddenly, recognizing the name easily in spite of never having meet the family. The Nara supplied the pharmacy with a lot of medicine taken from their lands and their deer. She had seen the receipts and transactions herself. They were no small help to her practice.

“Can you send me there directly or give me directions?” Sakura asked, thinking of the seal they had given her for emergencies. How was such travel to be managed?

“Minto sama could do such a thing, but not I. I have the directions for you here, it’s no too far to get lost. They’re sending a guide to the edge of your lands to take you in, so you shouldn’t have anything else to worry about. Ah, take my car to the edge of the forest where the trees make their
boundary here,” Shizune said, pointing to a picture on the map that hung behind her desk on the wall. Sakura knew it with a glance and her mind leapt ahead of itself, plotting a way to get from where she was to her destination with minimal wasted time.

Sakura took the bag meant for travel and Shizune’s keys before hopping over the threshold of her practice to the outside lot. Shizune’s car was easy to find and get into, and Sakura thanked her lucky stars that she had managed to get her license even with living in the city and never owning a car.

Sakura made it out of the parking lot with no collisions and only a few jerky stops before pulling out onto the road and nearly taking out a nearby hedge. It had been years since she last went on a good drive. Thankfully, the path was mostly straight and empty, getting her to the edge of town in under eight minutes. Sakura saw the trees and accelerated a hair before she had to slow down and turn the car off the road into a patch of gravel and park.

‘They’re sending a guide to the edge of your lands to take you in, so you shouldn’t have anything else to worry about.’

Sakura blinked, looking across the road at the forest of trees to see one of the most majestic deer she had ever seen, finely decorated with twelve points to his velvet antlers.

“Are you the guide?” Sakura called out, only feeling vaguely silly. He was such a majestic animal, there was no way anyone would blame her for calling out to it.

The deer turned slowly and then began to trot back into the forest where the trees were thick and old. Sakura bit her lip and ran after him, desperate to keep up. He was already a bit ahead of her and he wasn’t slow, even if he looked like he was floating.

As she passed between the trees she felt something in the air shift. She was being swallowed up by the forest, the forest was a thing, a living thing and it was taking her in. Breathing seemed impossible anywhere else apart from the trail the deer paved for her. She followed along behind it and she would be fine.

Then all of a sudden the forest around her seemed to shudder a breath and released some tension, opening up to her as she stepped into a clearing. A pair of does lay on folded legs beside a propped up body.

“Oh,” Sakura breathed, noticing at once the velvet antlers growing from the front of the boy’s skull. Each antler had four curved points, but one had been broken off on the left side. A cut was shallow across his face and there were bruises too. Sakura could guess what had happened, even if there were no other humans present nearby.

“Don’t move.” Sakura instructed, setting her bag down and pulling out a pointed light. She touched his face and guided it towards her. He grunted, but when she cooed he opened his eyes to look at her.

“You’re not Shizune.”

“You’re not Shizune.”

“Is that such a terrible thing?” Sakura asked, clicking on her light and checking his eyes. He flinched, but she was able to see that his pupils were the same size and dilated appropriately. Good. “I’m the new doctor, remember? Ino’s friend?”

The way he stared at her told her he didn’t remember, which was not uncommon with those suffering from a concussion. “You?” his tone was dismissive, but Sakura had heard worse from far less pleasant. At least he wasn’t threatening her with a knife.
“How long since the injury?”

He breathed deep, closing his eyes and letting his shoulder sag. “Troublesome. I’s the one injured, how should I know?” He squinted at her. “You seem familiar.”

Sakura looked back over her shoulder to the guide deer with the impressive rack. “How long has it been?” she asked, not quite knowing why she was directing her question at the animal. She knew she looked stupid, but at least the poor boy was likely too out of it to remember how foolish she had been when-

“Forty five minutes, no more.”

Sakura blinked in surprise, but it was the boy Shikamaru who cried out in surprise. “What are you doing talking to the outsider?!”

“She is no outsider. She came on invitation as a healer. She is here to see to you.”

The younger boy grumbled, pushing himself up to sit up straighter, even as Sakura’s hands reached out to steady him. “I don’t need to be seen by anyone, not even Shizune. I’ll just sleep it off.”

“You’re suffering from a concussion. You sleep it off you might not wake up. Hush and let me see the extend of the damage. You struggle and it will take longer.”

From behind her she heard the rough chuckle of the deer laughing. “You are no help to yourself, Shikamaru. The least you could do is let the woman aid you as she wishes.”

Sakura touched the younger boy and he grunted at the contact. “Letting a woman do as she wishes is never a good thing.”

“He’s a real charmer, isn’t he?” Sakura asked out loud, cleaning the cut on Shikamaru’s forehead before closing it with a bandaid. She reached up to touch the broken point of his antlers and he shivered at the contact, pulling away. “Sorry,” she supplied, not attempting to touch the site again. It wasn’t bleeding, and didn’t look to be causing him any more pain than a broken nail.

“What are you doing? I said I’d sleep it off.”

“If you do that I’ll stay here with you and wake you every three hours. Rest is good, but when suffering even a mild traumatic brain injury it is important to refrain from doing things that would make it easy to slip into a coma. I’m sorry but I don’t have the technology for a MRI scan to see if there is bleeding on the brain, so I need to monitor your symptoms.”

“I’m fine.”

Sakura huffed, remembering the boy Ino had introduced her to only days ago. True Shikamaru was in a new form, a different form, and he was injured, but it was still quite rude of him not to remember her. “In addition to not remembering me, you’re sensitive to light and sluggish. Not good signs if you ask me.”

“‘To be fair,” the deer behind her began. “He is always sluggish, that is not because of his injury. Shikamaru is quite the lazy boy.”

Sakura nodded. “I remember.”

Shikamaru glared at his deer and then closed his eyes. She heard him mutter once, ‘troublesome’ before sagging against the tree and falling asleep. Sakura let him, but true to her word woke him two
hours later and checked to see if his situation had deteriorated any more.

He blinked away and saw her with a bit more clarity. “Sakura, what are you doing here?” His horns were gone and the freckles that had been so dark on his face were gone. “What was I doing out here?”

The Deer that had kept Sakura company with old stories and new stories stood, chuckling once more. “Being reckless, young heir. Don’t be so heedless in your pursuit to show off. Sakura, I will leave you to him now. I believe he is past the danger.”

Sakura nodded. “I think so too.” She offered Shikamaru her hand and he climbed up with her. “I’ll call back around to see how doing, but it’s safe to move you now. Just…take it easy. No sudden moving.”

The Nara boy paused before an easy smile spread across his face. “Me, sudden movements? Sakura, you must not know me well.”

“A few hours ago you didn’t know me at all, so let me harp a bit.”

He laughed. “Troublesome woman.”
Chapter 8

Sakura blinked awake in the scant, grey hours before dawn. She frowned, shaking her head as she tried to remember her dream. Something about whispering…

She sighed, knowing already that she wouldn’t be getting back to sleep today, even though her bed was extremely comfortable.

Tripping over herself, Sakura rose to her feet and started her day. She stuck bobby pins into her short hair haphazardly, pulling it back from her sleepy features.

She moved through the motions, brushing her teeth as she looked at the dim, grey sky outside. She opened the balcony door, allowing the bracing cold to awaken her.

“Right,” she said, spitting into the sink. She smacked her face, grabbed a roll, and pulled on her climbing boots.

It was time to explore the wilderness.

Sakura stepped out of the building, grinning into the fog that hung low and blanketed the town. No one appeared to be awake and for a moment, it felt like Sakura was the only person in the world.

She shook off the silly feeling and set out with purpose. Shizune had told her about the little animal trail that led away from the heart of Pompeii and Sakura was excited to have the chance to explore the mountains that enveloped the little town.

As she hiked out, inhaling the crisp, heavy morning air, the sun began to rise in increments, the sky slowly lightening. Sakura huffed, legs burning as she settled on a flat rock. She turned to watch the skyline.

It was absolutely breathtaking. Fiery oranges and yellows streaked through the grey, veritable fireworks casting bright lights. Sakura grinned down as the light spread over the town far below. From here, Pompeii looked a bit like a patchwork quilt of browns, reds, and greens. Lake Icarus was a shimmering blue jewel.

Sakura frowned slightly, wondering when the results to the samples from the lake would come back in. Maybe she could contact that federal agent and see if he could expedite the process.

As the breeze ruffled her bangs, Sakura shook her head to clear her thoughts. She came up here for peace, not to engage in worrying about something that might not even be an issue.

Her eyes slid shut as she basked in growing warmth as the sun came out fully. She fell into something of a meditative state, calmed by the serenity around her.

It wasn’t meant to last.

A tongue washed over Sakura’s face, startling her out of her seat.

Sakura looked up from her fallen position, eyes wary as they took in the dog that perched on her lap, tail wagging slowly. It was some sort of greyhound mix, eyes bright and alert as it looked her over and its tongue lolled from its mouth.

“Huh,” Sakura said, smiling now that the initial adrenaline rush of fear passed. The blue collar
“Around his neck stood out to her as she scratched his ears. ‘Where’s your owner, boy?’”

“Ay,” a low voice said behind her.

Sakura stifled a yelp, turning from her rather undignified position on the ground to look up at the speaker. He was tall and lanky, hair a molten silver in the sunrise’s light. He wore an eyepatch but Sakura could see he was sloe-eyed by the other one. He also wore a black face mask, very similar to the one Kakuzu used.

“Is this your dog?” Sakura asked, still petting the greyhound. “He’s a sweetheart.”

The man’s eye crinkled upward in a smile. “He’s spoiled is what he is. Sorry for interrupting your time here.”

“It’s no problem,” Sakura replied with an easy smile, resettling herself on the rock. “What brings you up here at this time in the morning?”

The man lifted a thumb, pointing behind him. Sakura looked, gasping in surprise.

Eight other dogs of varying shapes and sizes were frolicking their way up the trail. Sakura couldn’t see any similarity among them, aside from the fact that they all adored their master. They bounded up to him, barking and sniffing at his pockets. The man laughed, pulling out treats to feed them.

Sakura wasn’t left out of their explorations. The dogs came over to her, licking her hands and wagging their tails with pleasure.

“Quite the brood you have here,” Sakura said, scratching the chin of the pug in her lap. He seemed to be the leader.

The man laughed. “Indeed.”

“What are their names?”

“I should probably introduce myself first,” he said with a chuckle. “I’m Kakashi Hatake, at your service.”

He bowed over his hand in a silly gesture and Sakura saw a piece of straw tucked behind his ears.

“Sakura,” she replied with an embarrassed grin. “I’m the newly arrived doctor in town.”

She didn’t catch the way his gaze grew sharp and assessing. He hid it with a sigh. “I guess you’re being put through your paces, huh?” he asked as he slumped into the seat next to her.

“You could say that,” Sakura said with a fond smile. “Wouldn’t trade the job for anything, though.”

Kakashi hummed, scratching beneath Bull’s chin. “Guess I should introduce you to the lads then?”

Once each dog had a chance to lick, nuzzle, and kiss Sakura, they settled into an easy silence, the dogs roaming about the rocks. It was nearing seven in the morning and Sakura knew she needed to leave to open the clinic.

She just didn’t feel a sense of urgency about it.

Finally, Kakashi turned to her. “Why’d you come to Pompeii?” he asked abruptly.

“Sorry, what was that?” she asked, taking her eyes off the dogs.
“Why did you come to Pompeii?” Kakashi reiterated, eye intent.

“I was offered a position here that would fulfill my residency requirements,” Sakura said blithely. “Best offer I had so I packed up my bags and headed here.”

“Just like that? Didn’t ask any questions about it? Why it was such a high paying job for a newly minted doctor in Smalltown, USA?” Kakashi pressed, voice hard.

“What are you getting at?” Sakura demanded, turning to face him.

He shrugged, gaze cool and distant. “Just making conversation.”

Sakura frowned, shaking her head. “Some conversation.”

Kakashi sighed, hopping to his feet and whistling to his dogs. “You might wish to look into the means by which you were brought here. You might be surprised.”

Sakura watched him amble away, hands deep in his pockets.

All Sakura was left with was a handful of unanswered questions and the heat of a new day.

Sakura made good time as she headed back to the clinic, aware that she was opening late. She knew Shizune would be there but she didn’t feel right leaving the woman there alone.

Sakura arrived at the clinic a little after eight.

She wasn’t alone.

Two boys stood outside the clinic, squabbling profusely.

One she knew. He had sunshine bright hair and bright blue eyes.

Naruto.

The other wore his dark hair long and shaggy, blue eyes glinting furiously as he stared down Naruto. Both had whisker marks across their faces.

She’d seen this second boy before, fighting with Pein.

“May I help you two?” Sakura asked politely, stepping forward.

“Sakura!” Naruto exclaimed, smile bright as he looked at her. “Just the person we were coming to see. My brother’s injured.”

“Shut up Naruto!” Menma hissed.

Naruto rolled his eyes, shoving his brother’s hands away from his abdomen.

Menma grunted, eyes shutting as his skin went pale. He stumbled, oblivious to Sakura and Naruto’s shouts of alarm.

Sakura rushed forward, helping Naruto catch Menma and balance him. She couldn’t see the wound too well, but she could see the blood.
“What happened?” she demanded, shoving the door open.

“D-Dr. Haruno?” Shizune asked, leaping up from her seat. “What is-?”

“Taking him to the back!” Sakura shouted, hands still bracing Menma as she urged him through the office. “Grab the file on Menma Uzumaki!”

Sakura didn’t wait for Shizune’s response, ushering Menma into one of the examination rooms and laying him down on the table. Gently, she pushed his hands away from the wound, trying to get a better look.

“D-don’t need the help,” Menma panted, face twisted in agony. “Naruto, you know -”

“Shut up!” Naruto replied. “Dr. Haruno-Sakura, what do you need me to do?”

“Hold his shoulders down,” Sakura replied. “Keep talking to him. The wound looks deep.”

The wound was pretty thin, some sort of stab wound. It resided below Menma’s ribcage, in a spot that could affect the delicate organs beneath the skin. The skin around it was inflamed and flushed a dark, rapidly purpling color. Sakura bit her lip; it didn’t look good.

“Here,” Shizune said, pressing a folder into her hand.

Sakura flipped it open, eyes still on Menma as she scanned the contents.

*Healthy...Kitsune...Accelerated Regenerative Properties...*

“Why isn’t he healing?” Naruto asked, breath catching in his throat as he stared down at his brother. “He should’ve been fine. He’s been in worse scrapes.”

Sakura nodded, pulling on gloves. “So this happens often?”

Naruto snorted. “Every day. He always comes back in one piece though. He...we...he has regenerative properties even beyond those of most kitsune. This shouldn’t be happening!”

Sakura frowned as she caught the red flicker in Naruto’s eyes.

That couldn’t be normal.

“Naruto,” Sakura said in a tranquil, soothing tone. She began to disinfect the wound area, disregarding Menma’s screams. “Naruto, I need you to calm down. If you can’t calm down, I will need you to leave the room. Shizune will have to take your place, but I think your brother would rather have you here, don’t you?”

Naruto took a deep, shuddering breath before he nodded. His eyes settled as a stormy blue.

“Now,” Sakura said briskly. “I believe whatever was used to stab Menma is still lodged within him. That’s why he isn’t healing. His body is rejecting the foreign object and refusing to heal around it.”

“Why?”

“Perhaps...perhaps something in him knows it will be worse in the long run,” Sakura replied, eyes intent on the newly cleaned wound. “I cannot see the foreign object so I’ll have to use tweezers to get it out.” She looked down at the man. “Menma, do you want a local anesthetic?”

Menma looked up at her with wide, wild eyes, hesitated, and then shook his head.
“He doesn’t like to be disorientated,” Naruto explained, brushing hair out of his brother’s face.

Sakura exhaled softly, nodding firmly. She couldn’t show either of them her distress. “Menma, you’re going to want to bite down on something.” She grabbed the spare, clean lab coat and wadded the sleeve. “Here.”

Menma accepted the coat, bracing himself for the pain.

Sakura set to work, tuning out everything else in the environment. She settled into the zone, a place so familiar that she almost sighed in relief. All that she knew here was the scent of disinfectant, the knowledge drilled into her brain by late night study sessions and flash cards, and the feel of the tweezers between her gloved fingers.

Here, she was queen.

Here, she was god.

She wouldn’t allow failure, not this time.

(...not again.)

With methodical precision, Sakura worked at the wound. Distantly, she noted the way Menma’s eyes rolled back and he suddenly went limp and loose. It was for the best.

Naruto stood steadfast in his vigil but he knew better than to interrupt the doctor as she worked. She was so different here than she’d been in the grocery store. He wouldn’t say she’d been uncomfortable while at the store but she’d been...guarded; wary. Now...well, now…

She was in her element.

Her whole demeanor was different, more sure. Every action she made had its purpose. She knew herself and her abilities and she was confident in them. In turn, Naruto found himself drawing confidence and strength from her.

Naruto swallowed, surprised to find his mouth dry.

He watched as she parted the broken skin below Menma’s chest, slipping the tweezers in deep. Naruto wanted to gag at the sight and the scent of the gore, but he refused. If Sakura could handle this, well, so could he.

Time seemed to stretch on for an eternity which was saying something, considering the fact that Naruto was, in fact, near immortal. Finally, Sakura pulled the tweezers away, a shard of some sort of glittering dark object held in its clasp. She immediately dropped the thing in a small plastic bag before grabbing a pad and pressing it against the wound.

“We have to stop the bleeding,” Sakura said to Naruto, keeping pressure against the wound. “He’s already lost too much blood.”

Naruto shook his head, unconcerned. “Doctor, he’s already healing.”

Brows furrowed, Sakura lifted the pad and glanced down. There was a thin pink line where the deep wound used to be. Even that was disappearing, leaving unmarred, tan flesh in its wake. The injury was a distant memory.

Sakura peeled away her bloody gloves and threw them in the biohazardous waste bin before gloving
up once more.

“He’s pale,” Sakura said, eyes flitting over Menma’s face. His eyelids fluttered rapidly and Sakura knew he was close to waking. “Naruto, you said you have accelerated regenerative processes; does it apply to your blood as well?”

Naruto shrugged, anxiety high in his bright cerulean eyes. “I wouldn’t know. We’ve never had to worry about it before.”

Sakura nodded, thumb rubbing over Menma’s pulse. She pulled out her stethoscope and pressed it against the pulse point in Menma’s neck. It was slow, weak, and sluggish.

Sakura stifled the urge to curse as she opened Menma’s file once more.

AB+

Of course.

“You have the same blood type?” Sakura asked brusquely.

“We’re twins,” Naruto replied.

“Identical or fraternal?” Sakura demanded.


“Shizune, I need Naruto Uzumaki’s medical file!” Sakura yelled.

Sakura turned her attention back to Menma, feeling at his pulse again. It was still weak, not gaining much traction even after the weapon was removed.

“Naruto, I believe I’m going to need to give Menma blood. Unfortunately, we don’t keep a store here and it’d take a while for me to access the nearest blood bank. If your blood types match, will you be a donor?”

“Of course!” Naruto said, gaze determined. “He’s my baby brother.”

Sakura smiled briefly up at him, accepting the file from Shizune. “You’re a good brother.”

Naruto blinked, dazzled by the grin. “I try.”

Sakura grinned in relief as she read over the file. “You two have the same blood type fortunately. I’m going to draw half a pint from you, Naruto. You’re going to need to sit down. You’ll be woozy and disoriented when I finish but I promise I will take care of you.”

“I trust you,” Naruto said, eyes soft with such confidence that it stole Sakura’s breath away.

“Thanks,” Sakura said. “Is there anyone you’d like me to call for the two of you?”

“Our parents,” Naruto said. “Or my cousin, Karin. Shizune will have their numbers.”

“Okay,” Sakura said, wiping disinfectant over Naruto’s arm. “Now, I’m going to insert this needle in the crook of your non-dominant arm and draw blood. I’ll transfer it to your brother via IV.”

Naruto nodded, not really understanding. “Please hurry,” he said, staring at his too pale, too still brother.
The needle plunged into his skin seamlessly, barely a prick. Naruto distantly noted how good Sakura was at it, before he had to turn his mind away from the task at hand. He didn’t do well with needles.

The bottle filled rapidly with dark blood. Sakura drew the needle away from Naruto’s skin, placing a pad and bandage over it. He slumped back into his seat as Sakura stepped away.

Sakura made her way back over to Menma, filling a plastic bag with the drawn blood. She attached it to the pole of the IV and grabbed the hypodermic needle and slid it into the protruding vein on the back of Menma’s hand. This done, Sakura opened the valve, allowing the blood to flow into Menma.

Now came the worst part.

Waiting.

There wasn’t anything she could do to speed this process up, nothing she could do to ease the pain and suffering. It was up to him.

She didn’t have to wait long.

The transfusion hadn’t been happening for more than maybe two minutes when the air around them suddenly felt thicker, heavier with anticipation.

Sakura found it difficult to breathe.

She watched, transfixed, as the blood that flowed down the clear tube turned a bright, blinding gold. It raced up from Menma’s hand, curling up the tube into the plastic bag that held the rest of Naruto’s blood. She looked back at Menma, gasping when she saw all of the lines of his veins and arteries lit with the same gold.

If she’d thought to look, Sakura would have seen that Naruto was affected in a similar manner.

But, she didn’t look.

There was a loud clap of thunder, making Sakura’s ears ring, followed by a piercing white light. When her eyes stopped streaming, both Menma and Naruto were sitting up, awake and alert in a way that they shouldn’t be.

Menma looked around before scowling. He ripped the IV from his hand, not even wincing as blood dripped freely.

Sakura glanced at his hand.

The blood was red.

Whatever just happened, whatever supernatural phenomenon that was, it was over.

“Why am I here?” Menma demanded, standing up.

“Your brother admitted you,” Sakura replied. “You were suffering from an upper abdominal wound.”

Menma frowned, pausing as he brushed a hand over his exposed chest. “It...it wasn’t healing.”

“Whatever injured you was left inside,” Naruto said, clapping a hand against his brother’s shoulder. “The good doctor patched you up.”
Menma turned his gaze on Sakura, the oddest look in his eyes as he surveyed her. “...Thank you,” he said, bowing to her.

“You’re welcome,” Sakura replied, lips quirking at the gesture. Her smile fell as she turned to examine the thing that started the whole mess. She lifted the sterile jar, examining its contents. “This is what was in you. Recognize it?”

Menma’s lips curled into a restrained snarl as he looked at the dark, glittering object. “Yeah, I know it.”

“What is it?” Sakura prompted when he didn’t continue.

“It’s...nothing,” Menma said, averting his gaze and stance.

Sakura sighed; he wasn’t going to talk. Still, she wasn’t a police officer; she didn’t have to know the details.

“Well, you’re better now,” Sakura said, trying to be energetic as she stripped off the gloves. She pressed the jar into Menma’s hands with a smirk. “You can keep that as a souvenir.”

Menma sighed as Naruto elbowed him in the ribs.

Sakura smiled slightly at their antics, leading them back to the front office.

“Sorry for all the chaos-” she began to Shizune, only to stop dead as she caught sight of the room’s other occupant.

“Surprised to see me?” Yagura asked with a pleased smirk.

“A bit,” Sakura admitted, startled to see him without his bodyguard. He seemed taller without them. “What brings you here?”

Yagura wasn’t listening to her. His pink eyes were trained on Menma and there was such distain in his face that Sakura couldn’t help but step back.

“What brings you here, whelp?” Yagura asked, stepping forward. His arms were spread wide and his neck stretched forward in such an odd way that Sakura blinked. “Caught in a trap?”

Sakura heard rumbling like a freight train beside her. She turned, realizing the noise came from both Naruto and Menma’s chests.

“Little slow on the uptake aren’t you?” Menma asked meanly. “Can’t help the age I suppose.”

“Age is nothing but experience for creatures like us,” Yagura said with narrowed eyes.

“My brother is no concern of yours,” Naruto said, teeth bared.

Yagura’s gaze flashed to Naruto and the atmosphere was suddenly oppressive again. It squeezed against Sakura’s lungs and left her gasping. “Stay out of this, pup. Your brother is dealing with forces far beyond him.”

“Stop,” Shizune said in a deadly quiet voice, her eyes bright green. Sakura could breathe once more. “If you wish to engage in idiotic actions you will do so elsewhere. Our clinic will not house such antics.”

Yagura was the last to look away but they all finally nodded in chagrin.
“What brings you here, Yagura?” Sakura asked, honestly puzzled. He didn’t appear to have any injuries.

Yagura’s eyes went wide. “I-I was wondering about the samples from Lake Icarus and how that all is coming along.”

“We’ve got a month or so left,” Sakura replied with a shrug. “I’ll talk to the federal agent...Senju I believe and see if he can get it expedited.”

“I-I-yes,” Yagura said, flushing as he shuffled his feet. “Of course. Please keep me informed.”

“I will,” Sakura said firmly. They stood in an awkward silence for several long moments. “Is there anything else?” she asked politely.

“I...no,” Yagura said, clearing his throat. “Have a wonderful day.”

They all watched as Yagura left as quickly as he’d arrived.

“That was…” Sakura began.

“ Weird?” Naruto said.

“Idiotic?” Menma muttered, crossing his arms.

“Strange?” Shizune said, eyes fading back to a sedate brown.

“Interesting,” Sakura said with a snort, looking at the three of them. “Let’s finish up the paperwork.”

“Menma!” an unfamiliar voice yelled as a woman stomped into the office. A redheaded woman flew at Menma, slugging him across the face with a closed fist. Sakura watched with awe as the woman caught him by the shirt to give him a thorough dressing down.

“Should I...should I intervene?” Sakura asked, still watching the scene unfolding before her. It was train wreck; she couldn’t look away.

“That’s his mother,” Shizune said with a wry smile. “Kushina Uzumaki. She’s next in line as Uzumaki matron and a hellion in her own right.”

“Yeah...I can see that,” Sakura said.

Minato followed in at an unhurried pace, flashing a quick smile Sakura and Shizune’s way before heading over to his family. He clapped Naruto on the shoulder, nodding along with his wife’s rant.

“Minato holds up pretty well, especially for marrying into the Uzumaki family,” Shizune murmured, almost to herself.

“They seem happy,” Sakura said, watching the four with a wistful smile.

Sakura knew Shizune was giving her a look but she refused to acknowledge it.

“Dr. Haruno!” Kushina exclaimed, sailing over to her. She grabbed Sakura’s hands as she smiled beatifically down at the woman. “Thank you for helping my hopeless son.”

“Oh, it was...it was nothing,” Sakura said, bashful.
“It was everything,” Kushina said firmly, eyes bright with tears. “My son is unruly and usually he survives alright but this time…” She inhaled a rattling breath. “Well, I’m glad you were here.”

“It’s my job,” Sakura said, wincing as she realized she sounded rude.

Kushina didn’t seem to mind. “We’re here to pick up the bill and take you out to lunch or rather brunch. It’s the least we can do.”

“No, that’s alright,” Sakura said.

“I insist,” Kushina said.

Sakura now understood why Kushina was the upcoming matriarch of the Uzumaki clan. She could steamroll anyone.

“Go,” Shizune said with a smile. “I can take care of the things here.” Sakura looked at her with pleading eyes but Shizune only laughed. “Shoo!”

“That settles it!” Kushina said, tucking Sakura’s hand into the crook of her elbow. “Boys, we’re going to brunch!”

Naruto whooped, sidling up on Sakura’s other side. “We’re going to Akimichi’s, right? It’s the best place for brunch.”

“Oh course,” Minato said, grabbing Menma by the scruff of his neck to bring him along.

Sakura grinned as the family bantered and bickered around her, including her whenever possible. It was nice to be part of such a loud and motley crew.

They walked down the streets, Sakura ignorant to the curious and speculative eyes that followed them. She also missed the crows that soared overhead.

The Uzumaki did not.

They stopped outside a red brick building, decorated with an elegant green sign that read Akimichi’s. Sakura’s eyes narrowed; she knew that name from somewhere.

“C’mon,” Naruto said, slinging an arm over Sakura’s shoulders as he guided her into a brightly lit room.

They seated themselves at a round table. Sakura found herself between Naruto and Menma with Kushina seated across from her. A waiter came by, placing menus on the table.

Sakura grabbed one, expression brightening as she caught sight of a whole section dedicated to waffles.

“How are you settling into Pompeii, Dr. Haruno?” Kushina asked.

“I think I’m getting into the rhythm of it pretty quickly,” Sakura replied. “It’s been a bit of a learning curve, certainly.”

“And is that seal working for you?” Minato asked, blue eyes worried. “I may not be Uzumaki by birth but I think my fuinjutsu has come along rather nicely.” At her confused look, he elaborated, “Fuinjutsu is the art of seals.”

Sakura flushed. “I actually haven’t yet used the seal. Honestly, I’d forgotten it.”
Minato laughed. “I’m sure you’ll have a chance sometime soon.”

“With our boys you certainly will,” Kushina sighed.

Sakura smiled, distracted as the waiter came back by.

“Are you ready to place your order?” he asked, pen and notepad ready.

“I’ll have a stack of strawberry shortcake waffles,” Sakura said, “with water.”

The others gave their orders and they relaxed into conversation. Sakura found that she enjoyed all of their company. Their personalities were so unique but they meshed together, maybe not in a perfect way, but a real way.

Sakura was startled when another man approached the table. He was tall, with long, wild russet hair that was barely restrained by a tie. There were red swirling marks on his face. His dark eyes were kind and warm as he nodded to Sakura. In his hands were Sakura’s waffles.

“Hi there,” he said, placing it in front of Sakura with a nervous gesture. “I’m the manager, Choji. Ino’s told me about you and your love of waffles.”

“Choji!” Sakura greeted, hopping to her feet to shake his hand enthusiastically. “Ino’s been telling me about you for over a decade. Did you inherit this place from your parents?”

He laughed, blushing beneath her attention. “Yep. They passed it on to me last year. I just wanted to introduce myself.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Sakura said. “Do you know the Uzumaki?”

“We’ve met,” Choji said with an easy grin, making his way around the table to trade greetings with the rest of the diners.

Sakura sat back down, making sure everyone else had their food before digging into her own.

She groaned in delight at the overwhelming delicious tastes upon her palate.

She could get used to this.
Chapter 9

It had been several weeks of the same strange behavior. Sakura was almost done getting used to the strange behavior of all the black birds outside her window. Ravens and crows came to her balcony to deposit glittering trash she kept and collected in mason jars up on the shelf. A few people had commented or made remarks about the behavior, but Sakura didn’t pay it any mind at the time. She didn’t think the birds were dangerous. Shikamaru even told her that much.

So how did she end up like this?

“That’s mine!” Sakura called out in exasperation, jumping up and down on her balcony for a height she couldn’t possibly reach.

A single blackbird perched on the high branches, looking awfully proud of the shining silver key in his beak, dangling from a chain. He had come to her balcony early that morning with nothing in his mouth, only to wander inside her open french doors and find her keys on the kitchen table. Sakura hadn’t suspected him capable of such calculated evil.

“They warned me about the Uchiha, too.”

Sakura felt like screaming in frustration as she reached from the drain pipe that was just out of reach. A nearby blackbird chuckled in a muffled caw. Sakura turned to glare and the bird shut up before taking off with a bowed head.

She had only one patient today, and if it came down to it, Shizune could handle it, but Sakura was convinced she could retrieve her key before the afternoon appointment. It was only the breakfast hours, after all.

As if mocking her determination, the bird spread his wings, wow they were huge, and caught the wind before taking off with her keys. A circle of ravens parted to let it through before drifting back down onto her patio to drop new gifts. Sakura screamed in frustration, biting her lip to muffle the sound in consideration of the hour and her neighbors.

She grabbed her scarf off the table and her phone, shoving it deep into her pants pockets while leaving a chair in the doorway to keep it from locking on her way out.

“She’s mine!” Sakura called, praying the woman was in the office this early. She said a muffled thank you when she saw Shizune at the counter, putting her purse down. “A bird just made off with my keys!”

Shizune blinked and then her eyes went wide as she registered Sakura’s words. “Oh no, not a normal bird.”

“No, one of those stupid black Uchiha birds. I’m going to try and get it back before Iruka comes in.”

“No-oh, he just called to cancel. You’re free for the day and I can handle the walk ins. Something tells me you’ll have a harder time getting your keys back than you know,” Shizune admitted with eyes full of pity. It was as if Shizune knew something she couldn’t share, and that made Sakura nervous.
“What’s the deal with the Uchiha anyway? They’re not mafia, are they?”

“No-not-not like that,” Shizune stuttered. “They run the police force in town, but they are a faction all their own. Each crowned Uchiha male has a unique blackbird flock unto themselves. Shisui and Itachi you’ve met, correct?”

Sakura nodded. “I treated Shisui’s wing.”

“There are others…many others.”

“What does that have to do with my key?” Sakura asked, feeling like Shizune was telling her something without telling her a thing.

“It could be that a bird belonging to an Uchiha you haven’t met took your key. Only that Uchiha will be able to make the bird return it to you. I knew there were too many blackbirds for just Itachi and his cousin, even though Itachi had the largest murder of crows.”

“How do I know which one I need to talk to? Can’t I just find one Uchiha and make him tell me? Would that be rude?” Sakura questioned, feeling anxious for all the distance that separated her from her keys. She needed those things!

A caw at the window drew her attention and she saw the oversized blackbird with her keys in his mouth perched on the sill. He flapped his wings once and then settled. Sakura’s eyes widened in realization. He was taunting her.

“You bastard.” She took a step and the bird took off.

Behind her, Shizune signed. “That won’t be any trouble. It seems there is an Uchiha that wants you to find him.”

“That doesn’t sound dangerous or creepy or scary at all,” Sakura muttered under her breath. Monsters and creatures of the magical variety were nothing to be bothered over, but going into unknown territory on her own smelled foolish on so many levels.

“If you feel you’re in danger at all, remember you have a seal you can use. It works backwards too, if you press your own blood against it and imagine a place it will take you back. The Uchiha might be worth fearing, but they won’t do anything… unforgivable. The others wouldn’t allow it. You’ve made too many friends already.”

Sakura remembered her meal from yesterday, shared with Naruto and his family and how nice it felt to be a part of that. Gaara was sweet, and Ino was the best friend anyone could ask for. Kisame was a big teddy bear, as was Zabuza under all that gruff exterior. So many people had already proved themselves to be amazing and kind and friendly. This was her home now, this was her community. The people here were her neighbors…and that included the Uchiha.

Sakura feels her voice steel before it’s even past her lips. “I’m going to go track down my keys.”

Shizune nods in understanding. Her expression is more knowing than Sakura can understand. “Be safe,” the older woman says.

It’s a paltry offering, but Sakura would take what she could get. Swiping a snack from the kitchenette in the workroom she grabbed a satchel for her back and headed out in the direction of the bird. By the time she’s outside there were more and more birds circling and it’s apparent that the bird that made off with her keys was not a part of that particular flock. There were differences and she doubts it was even a raven or crow now that she thought about it.
The blackbird took off towards the mountains, but not the ones she hiked up earlier that week. No, there were several different clusters in the range that made Pompeii into a valley of pine trees and monsters. It’s also on the opposite side of the Nara’s lands.

Every time Sakura thought she had lost sight of the blackbird it would swing out from some shadow or swoop low and perch, pretending not to notice her until she was close enough before taking off again and nearly flying out of sight again. It was a game of cat and mouse if ever Sakura saw one, and she felt like such a fool for falling right into the Uchiha’s hands in such a cliche fashion.

“Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly,” Sakura grumbled to herself, pushing back the low arm of a pine branch.

The forest was growing thicker all around her as the ground sloped upwards at a steeper angle. She dug the toe of her shoe into the earth and gripped with the toes of her shoes when she found the ground moist. When she inhaled the scent of the earth was in her lungs, heavy with all the oils of plants thankful for the rain. Mist from the high altitude made the ground moist in the early morning.

“I’ll have you know the birds on this mountain don’t entertain spiders or flies,” a new voice chimed in, too close to her ear.

Sakura turned sharply and felt the ground give out just enough to make her slip backwards. Her hands went backwards to brace and she felt the cold touch of soil under her nails, but she stopped in her fall before the rest of her body could follow. Another figure was behind her—or was it the same figure as the first one—and he was holding her up with two hands under her arms.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit early for you to be falling for me?”

Sakura stared up and saw grinning red eyes and a curved set of lips. She groaned on impulse. “Uchiha.”

“One of many, I assure you, love,” he cooed, pulling her up before straightening her out.

Instead of dragging her around, he helped her up and stood her on her own to feet before backing away. Sakura heard a heavy rustle and turned slowly this time to see the whole of his figure.

He was not what she had expected.

“What?” She felt her jaw grow slack at the sight.

He was probably the least human of all the people she had encountered in Pompeii, and that included Kisame. His face was handsome enough with sharp, avian features and mesmerizing red eyes, but the rest of his body was…something else. Behind his shoulders a pair of enormous black wings stretched, absently shifting and beating out to shake free loose feathers. His hands were tipped in black claws that stained him like soot up to his forearms.

“Not what you were expecting when you came into our forest?” he near preened, cocking his head at her in an oddly avian manner. His hair fell over his shoulders, or what she thought was his hair. It ended in black feathers all the way down down to his hips at parts.

“Who are you?” Sakura asked, feeling oddly caught between open wonder and apprehension. Something in her gut told her this was not the Uchiha she had been planning on running into. He didn’t remind her of the bird the same way Itachi’s ravens or Shisui’s crows seemed to fit either of them.

He grinned and more of his hair shifted over his shoulders, caught in the breeze like feathers in the
wind. “I’m more interested in who you are, new doctor. But I’ll tell you my name and be content with that.” He bowed low and his wings stretched out far behind him. “Madara Uchiha, your most humble servant.”

“You’re quite the striking fellow aren’t cha?” Sakura murmured, still fascinated with the span of his wings. They seemed to go on forever. Her eyes couldn’t see all of him at once. Sakura remembered her situation and shook her head to get a better grip on her thoughts and ended up coughing. “Uh, I mean, nice to meet you, sir.”

His feathers rustled, bunching up and growing thicker for a moment before they smoothed out again and pressed down against his back. “Just Madara is fine. I’m not old enough to be called ‘sir’ by such a delicious young woman.”

Sakura doubted that, but kept her lips sealed. Her gut told her Madara was decades older than her at the very least.

“But that’s that and not nearly as important or as interesting as hearing about what you’re doing here on my mountain. What made you come all the way out here, love?”

“It wasn’t like I planned this,” Sakura said, trying not to sound as agitated as she felt. “I lost my keys.”

“And you thought they were here?” he laughed, smile reaching his eyes.

“Not on their own.”

Sakura pointed up and Madara turned just in time to catch the flash of metal in a bird’s beak as it flew off. His smile fell off his face and new look came into his eyes.

“Who’s bird was that?” he huffed, turning slightly to face a new part of the sky.

A moment later a huge condor cut across the sky and circled the pair of them. Sakura nearly staggered as the bird swooped for Madara’s offered arm. It was black and massive, a perfect match for the man who looked like he ruled the skies. A screech later and the bird settled his wings.

“I’ll apologize now, before I can say anything else. It seems one of my family members thought it would be fun to lure you up here. Huh, for being so old you would think they would learn patience. It’s not like you’re dating anyone already.”

The last part was muttered but Sakura caught it. “What?”

“What?” He blinked, smiling wide and innocent.

“How did you-ah, no. You know what, the less I know the easier I sleep. I don’t want to know.” Sakura took a step back and fit her hands over her hips. “Do you think you can help me get my keys back, or at least tell me what I can do?”

Madara hummed, shaking his arm and letting the condor take off, circling and screeching. “That is within my power. Come to the manor and dine with us. Your chasing will accomplish nothing but exhaustion. Let it come to you.”

“That sounds like it might take a while,” Sakura huffed, feeling her shoulders sag.

Her day was gone and she was relying on Shizune too much. She was supposed to be giving the other woman more of a break, but here she was taking so much time off to get set up and have lunch.
with grateful people. She felt horribly guilty for going out to eat again when she should really be working. She had her professional pride as a doctor to consider.

She felt a presence close in and under her chin Madara slipped a black clawed finger. It was warm and not unpleasant when he tilted her face up to meet his. “You fret like a human, love. You have all the time in the world to work. You’ve not yet known the land you live in, so don’t feel guilty for taking such a offering. The Uchiha wish to greet you and share sake with you. There can be no greater use of your time,” he chuckled.

“I didn’t say anything about that. I-I’ll go. How do I get to this manor?”

Madara’s grin was wide and stretching wider. “That depends…are you afraid of heights?”

Sakura had a bad feeling that really wasn’t that bad when she really thought about it, but she swallowed and nodded anyway. “I’m fine with heights…I think.”

She didn’t have the breath left to say anything else as his arms wrapped around her middle and his wings stretched out around them. They were massive and wide and greedy for the skies, pumping powerfully to launch them off the ground and into the air. Sakura would have screamed if she could, but all she could do was hold on tight and grab Madara around the neck. He chuckled at her reaction as she clung tighter.

They climbed higher and higher, breaking through the clouds and scattering a flock of blackbirds. Sakura almost yelped when she felt one brush too close to her with its wings. Madara reached with his free arm and pulled her closer to his chest, tucking her into his arms protectively. He was warm all around even as the air thinned and bit at her exposed cheeks. She couldn’t help but curl into him a little, not minding how it felt. She could feel his heartbeat under her palm when she rest it next to her head. It fluttered like a child’s: A bird’s heart.

Eventually the circled a thicket of clouds and burst into a clearing of air. Sakura could see the mountain below them and a red spot stood out from the thicket of white and green. Madara caught a draft and turned into it, riding it down as Sakura screamed from the thrill of a near free fall through the sky. His wings, once pinned back tight, swooped out before they could get too close and caught the updraft, breaking their descent and allowing the man to touch down as lightly as a feather. Sakura tumbled from his arms on a giggle, stepping onto earth and then falling to her but with another laugh. Madara held her arms all the way down.

“You’re alright?” he asked with a small, secret sort of smile.

“What do you think? You could have warned me!” Sakura still felt her ribs strain from laughing in the thin, thin air. Her eyes felt light and her head felt dizzy.

“You loved it, every minute of it,” he chuckled.

“You think so?” Sakura swayed a bit in his arms, vision blurring. She had laughed too hard and the air was too thin for her. “Why-what makes you think that?”

“You never looked away, never closed your eyes. You soaked in every second of it.” He paused and the humor faded from his voice. “Sakura? Hey…oi, Sakura!”

She could hear him but her eyes didn’t work anymore, and she couldn’t remember closing them, but everything was black and light and far and she remembered laughing. She was in the clouds and the sky was all around her. She had been flying….

When Sakura opened her eyes again it was to the sight of green. A small plant was turned towards
her face and when she sat up she saw she was in a bed on the floor surrounded by plants. It was much easier to breath all of a sudden.

“You’re awake.”

Sakura turned none too slowly, scrambling with the heavy bedcover held close to see a new face sitting politely at the foot of her bed. He looked very much like Madara, but his face was softer and his hair was styled differently and not so wild.

“Who are you?” Sakura asked, feeling her voice work again. It was a sticky sort of sound in her throat and she realized she must have slept for a while. She sounded groggy.

“I’m Madara’s younger brother Izuna. I’m also a part of the Uchiha clan.” He pointed his fingertips together and bowed his head to her. “I must apologize for his reckless actions and how he nearly endangered you. He was careless and we are ashamed. Uchiha do not treat their treasured guests so poorly.”

“Oh-hey, hey, it’s not that big of a deal. It’s okay, I’m fine. You don’t have to bow to me or anything. Come on, lift your head.” Sakura words came out in a mess of stuttering.

“No, I must. It was my Magpie that…stole your keys and lured you here to our home. It was an act I am ashamed of for it shamefully caused you such harm and discomfort.” He swallowed and lifted his head a fraction off his hands, but did not turn his face up to see her. “I must beg your forgiveness.”

“You’re fine,” Sakura answered easily. Izuna looked up sharply, eyes wide. Sakura shrugged. “I’m just guessing here, but is it because you can’t leave this house here or something?”

“How did you…”

Sakura scratched the side of her cheek, feeling sheepish. “There’s actually a file or two for Uchiha tengu I have at my practice. It’s not uncommon for some to have difficulty adjusting to the low altitudes. Sometimes they get sick if they try to come down too quickly, which I guess is sort of what happened to me. Madara brought me up here in a flash instead of letting me walk up and acclimate on my own.”

“I am ashamed of my brother’s foolishness, but also my own weakness is to blame here. Forgive me, I was selfish.”

Sakura felt a part of her heart throb for the guy. She had a soft spot for sick people who felt limited because of their disabilities. Plus, the guy had to be lonely with no one but family to keep him company.

“I forgive you.” Izuna raised his head and caught Sakura smiling down at him. “Don’t beat yourself up over it. But if it’s really so bad, why don’t you make an appointment with my office for a house call and I can see about starting treatment on your lungs so that acclimation might be possible. It’s been done with other Uchiha in the not so distant past, and medicine has gotten so much better.”

“I-I will talk with my brother about it.”

“Cool, I’ll look forward to working with you then.”

Izuna’s softer face turned a light shade of pink as he nodded, touching the tips of his index fingers together and looking down. He started to say something when the doors behind him were thrown back on their tracks, slamming open to let Shisui and another black winged Uchiha stumble in. Behind them Itachi trotted, scowling darkly.
“I just wanted to look-Sakura!” Shisui exclaimed, jumping up. “You’re finally awake. I heard you were here and rushed right over.”

He pushed the other Uchiha off him and spread his wings, gliding into the room and perching down at the edge of her bed, smiling wide. Behind him, Itachi followed normally while the third Uchiha rose on a grumble. Shisui giggled boyishly.

“Ah, you guys are off duty today? I haven’t seen you around lately,” Sakura replied easily.

Izuna and Madara had been dressed in traditional Japanese men’s robes, but Shisui and Itachi were still in their uniforms. The last, unnamed Uchiha was also dressed traditionally, but had turned his face away from her the moment he stood up. He was keeping his back to her too.

“Um, sorry for intruding like this,” Sakura added, nodding in a short bow to the boys. “I didn’t mean to make a scene for you to worry about.”

“Ah, don’t worry about that!” Shisui exclaimed, wings rustling behind him in agitation. “It’s that stupid uncle’s fault for getting carried away. What was he thinking, dragging you up here like that?”

“It was foolish,” Itachi added in monotone.

“He’s an idiot,” Izuna sighed in resignation.

The last Uchiha huffed loudly, crossing his arms. “He’s sulking enough for it, so don’t make him feel worse about it you brats.”

Izuna turned up his nose and narrowed his eyes and the last Uchiha while Shisui and Itachi exchanged looks. “That’s what one would expect of brother’s pet, no? You’re too quick to defend the oaf, Tobi.”

The Uchiha turned slightly, glaring over at Izuna. “That’s not my name, damn it. I told you I go by Obito from now on. Obito, got it?”

Izuna huffed, closing his lids and turning his face away as if he was glancing away from a lot of garbage. “As you wish. It’s only big brother and that damn scarecrow that will care to remember.” Izuna squared his shoulders. “You can tell my brother that we’ll be along shortly, so he can sulk at the head of the dinner table instead of his garden.”

Obito huffed loudly, visible eye narrowed before he hiked his shoulders and stalked off to do as he was told. Izuna turned to Itachi and raised a slender brow. “Will your younger brother be joining us, Itachi?”

Itachi shook his head, stare leveled and unflinching, even as Sakura got the impression that Izuna was trying to humble the younger Uchiha.

“Sasuke is absent today. I believe he is down below in the town on his own.”

“He knew we asked for him?”

Itachi nodded and then lowered his head. “I apologize for my brother’s willfulness, but please indulge him this. He brings no shame.”

Izuna huffed and then waved a hand dismissively. “Fine, less flock to bother with. I doubt my brother will be quite so willing to share his attention as it is. You may both go ahead. Sakura and I will be along shortly.” He turned to her, expression softening into something almost unsure. “That is,
if you feel well enough to move. Do you require further rest?”

“Ah, I think I’m good. I should probably walk around a little bit though. Was I out for long?”

“Only an hour or two.”

Sakura ran her hands through her hair and then stretched her arms up above her head, yawning. “That’s enough for me.” It was in that moment her stomach decided to growl low and pitched. Her cheeks instantly reddened, even before she heard Shisui’s muffled snicker.

Izuna’s hand flew out, gesturing towards the opened doors. “Tell them to prepare the food with haste,” he snapped at Itachi and Shisui, expression stern. “Can’t you see she’s starved.”

“Oh, that’s not—” Sakura tried to interject and explain away her upset stomach, but held her words back when she remembered the pitiful breakfast she had and how long ago that had been. It was well past noon, and well past her lunch time break hour.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” Shisui chuckled, rising up with his black wings out. “We’ll make sure it’s warm for you.” Itachi followed soon after, walking normally.

“If it wouldn’t be too forward of me…” Izuna stood and held out his hand for her to take. “A turn about the grounds to steady your legs?”

Sakura nodded and accepted his hand. When she stood she realized Izuna was more than a head taller than her, but not as tall as Madara. He was of decent frame, but in comparison to his brother he was clearly the smaller one. She also noticed he didn’t display his wings as much. Shisui and Madara seemed to like showing them off, while Izuna and Itachi were more reserved. She wondered if that was a Uchiha thing or a Tengu thing. Asking about it made her feel funny and she suspected it would be bad manners to pry.

Izuna took her outside and they walked along the porch that encircled the traditional Japanese styled manor. There was a rock garden perfectly manicured and a number of differently themed zen gardens around the property. Sakura noticed a few stray Uchiha tending to some of the greenery, but most kept out of sight or out of their way. The blackbirds felt free to linger in the branches overhead. Sakura spotted a different array of birds beyond just the crows and ravens she had come to expect.

“Izuna noticed her staring and chuckled. Uchiha from the main house and Uchiha leaders are blessed with dominion over a different kind of bird at birth. It is how we distinguish ourselves. Brother can be separated into main and branch houses depending on the selection process.”

“And you control the Magpie?” Sakura guessed.

Izuna nodded. “Madara has the condor, Itachi and Shisui control the crows and ravens, and that brat of Itachi’s brother Sasuke got hawks of all things. There are a few others, but they’re away and won’t be available for introductions.”

With a wave of his hand a blackbird broke away from the flock and settled onto Izuna’s hand, dropping something from his beak. Sakura gasped when she recognized her keys. “Those are mine.”

“Yes, I apologize once more.” He pressed the keys into her hands and the bird took off. “I won’t do such a thing again, but please don’t forget to visit us.”

Sakura grinned, pocketing the key. “Make an appointment and I won’t.”

Izuna grins shyly and then stops her in front of a set of rice screen doors. Rolling one back he steps
in and then makes room for Sakura to do the same. It’s a long room with a low table set with an assorted of traditional Japanese dishes. At the head of the table are two low seats made out of cushions and Madara is sitting on one, looking like a kicked puppy. He brightens at the sound of the door being rolled back further.

At the left side of the table Itachi and Shisui sit beside each other. The ‘Obito’ Uchiha sits on the same sight, but one seat away from Itachi. It’s the first time Sakura sees his face and forces herself not to stare at the scars that mar one half of his face.

“You’re well?” Madara asks, rising slightly. His wings are out but pressed tightly against his back.

“Fine enough. No more wild rides, though.” Sakura laughed, going to a seat beside Madara and across from Itachi as Izuna designated. Madara seemed to preen at the seating selection, flushing pleasantly.

“I’m almost not mad at my brother anymore. I was afraid I might have hurt you with the sudden climb,” Madara added.

“And I’m almost not mad at you, dearest brother. Poor Sakura would have been fine if she climbed up slowly on her own. You just had to go and ruin it. She was pale as a ghost in bed.”

“I’ve seen ghosts, they’re not nearly as pretty,” Madara muttered into his sake cup, pouting at his younger brother. They were a fun pair to watch bicker.

More food came out and Izuna and Madara both insisted on Sakura trying everything. Shisui would fly up every so often and add something to her plate from across the table and Itachi offered her more and more sympathetic glances that begged her patience as he held his cousin back as best he could.

“It’s fish, who doesn’t like fish?!” Shisui exclaimed, holding a small plate out for Sakura to take.

“Idiot, Calamari isn’t fish.” Itachi shook his head.

“Eh, this is calamari? I thought this was the breaded fish.” Shisui tried a piece, crunching it sloppily. He didn’t wait for his mouth to be empty before adding, “It tastes the same.”

“How do squid and fish taste the same? And put your wings away. Stop showing off, you’re getting feathers in our food.” Itachi hissed while Izuna tilted up his nose and Madara bellowed in laughter. Even Obito huffed a quiet laugh from his spot at the table when Shisui whined about putting his wings away. He had preened them extra for Sakura to see how well he groomed himself this time. And besides, Madara had his out all the time.

“Madara is our patriarch,” huffed Itachi, looking almost exhausted.

The spoken of Uchiha chuckled at the mention of his name. “Ah, let the boy show off. If he thinks he can compete with these…” Madara’s wings stretched out and shimmered in the light from the windows in a healthy black gloss. Madara grinned, angling his wings to catch even more of the light.

“Brother…” Izuna moaned a little, turning red in the face as he glanced down at Sakura.

She couldn’t help but grin and laugh along with the rest of the family.

The mountain was cold, but inside at the family’s table, Sakura felt warm.
Chapter 10

Sakura shuffled through the papers on her desk, whistling merrily. There were only a few scheduled appointments today and, while there would certainly be some walk-ins, it left her in a good mood.

She and Shizune were making their way through the backlog of file entries pretty steadily but there were some discrepancies that irked at Sakura’s mind.Incomplete information on some forms that could be chalked up to incompetence or human error.

But the others…

Sakura bit her lip.

Some of the forms contained little tidbits of information that seemed random and intrusive to the patient. “5000 mg of local anesthesia to sedate the patient.” “Patient’s pain tolerance is extraordinarily high.” Perhaps the most concerning bit to Sakura was the repeated occurrence of the word “redacted.”

It might be nothing, she hoped it was nothing. Not many of the files had such concerning language.

“Oi!”

Sakura glanced up, surprised she hadn’t heard the bell chime a new visitor. It was Shizune’s day off, bless that woman, and Sakura was sole caretaker of the clinic.

The man who stood before her was tall and lean. His dark hair was artfully messy and the scowl he wore upon his face was thunderous. While Sakura didn’t know him, she did know his eyes.

“Sasuke?” she guessed, looking up into pretty pinwheel eyes.

He folded his arms, regarding her impassively.

Sakura fought a sigh as she stood, remembering Izuna’s comments of “brat” and “sullen” only the day before.

“How can I help you?” Sakura inquired politely.

“Stay away from my brother!” Sasuke hissed.

Sakura was fascinated by the way feathers emerged from his skin as he spoke, ruffling and shifting with indignation.

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand,” Sakura said blithely, unfazed by his tantrum. The feathers were certainly impressive, but they didn’t particularly scare her.

“You’ve done something to him, bewitched him or something. Him and the rest of the family,” Sasuke said bitterly, eyeing her with spite.

“They’re just being kind,” Sakura replied, finding herself amused by Sasuke’s blatant jealousy. His youth was made obvious in his pout and demeanor. She was certain he was older than her by decades, but he certainly didn’t act it. “I’m new in town. It stands to reason that I’m a bit fascinating at the moment. I’m sure the interest will die down.”

Sasuke would not be soothed. “It’s different! We’ve had newcomers before but you…Itachi has his
birds follow you! He never does that.”

Sakura hummed thoughtfully, tentatively patting Sasuke’s arm. She did her best to hide a wry smile as she did her best to comfort the distraught Uchiha.

He leaned into her touch unconsciously, enjoying the way she preened the feathers on his arm.

“I’m the new doctor in town and Shisui and Itachi stopped by on one of my first days here. They’re interested for the moment but it’ll pass,” Sakura said. “It always does.”

Sasuke opened his eyes to stare at her curiously, wondering at the acerbic tone in those last words. Then he winced as it pulled at the injury at his neck.

“Are you alright?” Sakura asked, switching to professional mode. Her eyes assessed him, centering in on his covered neck. “What happened to your neck?”

“Nothing,” he said, feeling himself flush with embarrassment. His plans were getting all twisted and ruined and it was all her fault! Still, he didn’t find himself all that angry with her as her cool fingers brushed the bandage at his throat. Sasuke swallowed, finding himself flustered. “It’s nothing!”

“Doesn’t look like nothing,” Sakura replied, pulling her hands away.

Sasuke told himself he didn’t miss her touch.

They regarded each other in silence as Sakura waited for a truthful response.

“I ended up getting into a little skirmish yesterday,” Sasuke said, resisting the urge to pull a “Naruto” and scratch the back of his neck. He refused to look so uncool. “It isn’t that big a deal.”

Sakura frowned at the blatant lie. “Will you allow me to take a look? I don’t want the wound to get infected.”

Sasuke visibly wavered before he hung his head with a sigh. “Fine,” he said.

“Would you like to go to one of the back rooms?” Sakura asked.

“Here’s fine,” Sasuke said.

“You can take my seat,” Sakura said graciously.

Sasuke complied, swallowing hard against the feeling of her fingers at his throat. He watched with spinning eyes as Sakura unwrapped his clumsy bandaging attempt to examine the wound.

It was long but shallow, an inflamed, angry red line that cut across his neck and collarbone.

Sakura clucked, pulling on a pair of gloves. “What sort of skirmish involves knife wounds?” she asked.

“Not a knife,” Sasuke said, averting his gaze. He’d already said too much.

Sakura paused in her movements, watching him. He stayed quiet and she moved on, knowing when to leave a subject alone.

Instead, Sakura grabbed her antiseptic spray and popped the cap off.

“Now, this will sting,” Sakura warned.
Sasuke scoffed, but nodded his understanding.

Sakura bit her lip to keep from grinning at his overly prickly personality. He seemed to have completely forgotten his initial purpose in coming here. It was really quite adorable.

Sakura sprayed along the cut and grabbed a long adhesive bandage. She quickly and neatly pressed it over his wound. She thoughtfully ignored the way his feathers roiled and fluffed up, showcasing how much the antiseptic stung.

“You should be alright now,” Sakura said with a bright smile, tossing her gloves in the trash. “Please come back in for a checkup if the wound gets any worse or infected.”

“Thank you,” Sasuke said in an odd voice. He hesitated before catching one of her hands in his. When she looked up at him, he continued, “Seriously, thank you.”

Sakura’s lips curled up in a slight smile as she nodded. “You’re quite welcome, Sasuke.”

He ducked his head, smiling. He itched to stretch out his wings and let out a great cry, freeing himself of the growing heaviness and warmth in his chest. Sasuke warred with himself, unused to such inner turmoil.

“I’ll try to come to the next family dinner if you’re invited again,” Sasuke said, cheeks flushed.

Sakura smiled up at him. “That’ll be nice.”

The tranquility of the moment was interrupted by the tinkling of the bell above the door.

Sakura turned away from Sasuke and he immediately missed her presence. He turned as well, scowl deepening as he caught sight of the man in the doorway.

Agent Tobirama Senju.

“Am I interrupting something?” Tobirama asked, red eyes flinty as a smirk crawled across his face.

Sasuke wanted to punch the smarmy bastard.

“Not at all,” Sakura said. “How may I help you?”

Tobirama shifted his weight. If Sakura didn’t know any better, she’d say he was nervous. “Could we speak privately?”

Sakura glanced at Sasuke. He bristled but, glancing between Sakura and Tobirama, nodded. He knew he was no match for Tobirama. Not alone.

“Send the bill to the manor,” he said, casually brushing a hand over Sakura’s.

She snorted, shaking her head. “All I did could have come from a first aid kit. It’s free of charge.”

Sasuke’s smile softened and he moved to step closer. He stopped, remembering himself, and backed away instead. “See you soon, doctor.”

Sakura waved him goodbye before returning her focus to Tobirama.

“What was it you wanted to speak of?” she asked.

Tobirama didn’t respond right away. Instead, he spread his hands and twisted them in complicated
gestures. Gold, glittering magic flowed from his fingers, dancing gracefully past Sakura to coat the corners of the room.

Sakura frowned slightly, rubbing at the tingling sensation left behind by the magic that caused the fine hairs on her arms to rise. She cocked a brow.

“Keeps people from eavesdropping. The Uchiha have no honor,” Tobirama said, voice calm and matter of fact.

Sakura disagreed but decided not to start an argument. “What brings you here today, agent? And why the secrecy?”

“I came by to see if the results on those samples came in,” he said. “The Bureau wants to examine the results.”

Sakura shook her head. “We have a few more weeks at the earliest unfortunately. The lab is inundated with other requests. It takes a while to process the results in any case.”

Tobirama frowned thoughtfully, pulling out a silver phone. “Could you give me the information on the lab and the tracking number or code on the sample? Perhaps we can expedite the process.”

“That’s quite kind,” Sakura said, a bit surprised. She didn’t really expect much of this mysterious and somewhat standoffish agent. “Thank you.”

Tobirama smiled down at her and it completely transformed his face.

Sakura found herself transfixed for a moment by bright eyes and a playful grin. Something settled over her, not unlike magic. She did her best to shake it off, finding herself a bit embarrassed.

“Let me get that information for you, Agent Senju,” she said, rifling through the papers in her desk.

“Tobirama, please,” he replied, leaning against her desk.

Again, there was a heady sort of weight that settled deep in her bones and thrummed there as she met his eyes.

“Would you quit that?” she asked, a little irritable.

He startled, hands fumbling off the desk. “Whatever do you mean?”

Sakura’s eyes narrowed on his too innocent smile. “I’m not sure what exactly you are or if this ability is passive, but I can feel your magic every time I make eye contact with you.”

Tobirama flushed, covering his eyes with his hands. He’d no idea he’d even activated his thrall. There was something about this miniscule woman, a fire in her, that drew him in. And now he’d way overstepped his boundaries.

“I am so sorry,” Tobirama muttered, drawing the power back into himself. The buzzing sensation beneath Sakura’s skin faded away to her relief. She ignored the part of herself that felt bereft. She was sure it was a latent effect of...whatever that magic was. “That was, well, it was completely uncalled for on my part.”

Sakura flapped a hand, waving away his worries. Her lips did curl up a bit at the concern in his voice. He wasn’t the unflappable agent she initially thought he was. He was actually a bit of a dork. A charming dork, sure, but a dork nonetheless. “It’s quite alright, Tobirama. I’m coming to
understand that some abilities are a little difficult to control. No harm, no foul.”

“Still, it was really rude of me,” Tobirama said, shame curdling his insides.

Sakura paused, looking up at him. She recognized that tone of voice. He wasn’t going to let this go. He would keep beating himself up over it. She moved around her desk, placing a hand on his. He looked down at her. “Tobirama, I forgive you.”

Tobirama sighed in relief. He was a bit surprised that she didn’t seem to care about the offense. She could have brought him before the local court. Using abilities on other monsters was seriously frowned upon. He could lose his position at the Bureau over this if she pressed for it. Yet she did not. “Thank you.”

Sakura nodded easily. “Water under the bridge.”

Tobirama regarded her, warmth filling his chest.

She looked him over, falling into a professional guise as she assessed him. “Have you had a check-up recently? We don’t have a file on you.”

Tobirama smirked down at her. “I don’t need physical assessments.”

Sakura was unimpressed. “It’s always a good idea to receive a physical. They didn’t require it at your job?”

“I’m Fay,” he replied as if that explained everything.

She watched him blankly, no recognition on her face.

“You know, the Fair Folk, Seelie? Elves to some people.”

Sakura shrugged. “Just because you’re supernatural doesn’t mean you can skimp on medical evaluations.”

Tobirama actually laughed, pleasantly surprised. He raised his hands in surrender. “Alright, alright. What all does this consist of?”

Sakura grinned triumphantly.

Tobirama felt something akin to anticipation trickle down his spine.

“Take a seat,” Sakura said, gesturing to the table as they entered the examination room.

Tobirama did as requested.

Sakura grabbed a clipboard and pen, preparing to complete the intake form. “Name?”

“Tobirama Senju.”

“Age?”

Tobirama paused, frowning thoughtfully. “I...I am not quite sure.”

“An estimate then?” Sakura asked, glancing over at him curiously.

“A few millennia at the least,” he said. “I’d say three and a half millennia?”
Sakura kept her face blank as she filled in the estimation. Over a couple millennia and never once had he thought to receive a check-up? She had her work cut out for her. She scrambled to remember what she knew of the Fay from literature and lore.

They were tricksters at heart, luring mortals into their world with alluring promises. If a mortal consumed the food of that world, they’d be caught there forever. There were two courts of the Fair Folk, the Seelie and the Unseelie; the Light Court and the Dark Court.

Yet none of this really assisted her in developing a plan of action for Tobirama. And, unfortunately, none of her other patients were Fay either.

“Remove your blazer please,” Sakura requested.

Tobirama stood and obliged, pulling off the blazer and folding it neatly at his side. Beneath he wore a white dress shirt. He loosened his tie and cuffs, raising a brow in Sakura’s direction.

She nodded, grabbing her stethoscope. She had to start somewhere even though she was basically going in blind. “This may be a bit cold,” she said, as she pressed the diaphragm beneath his shirt against his back. “Deep breath in,” she said, listening intently.

Tobirama obeyed.

Sakura’s brow furrowed as she didn’t hear a heartbeat. At least, not in the normal sense. There was a sound of thrumming within Tobirama’s chest. It reminded Sakura of the wind whistling through trees, of rustling leaves and of shaking branches. It was an irregular sound and it certainly wasn’t a heartbeat.

Sakura pulled away and moved around to his front.

Tobirama watched her intently. “Trouble?” he asked.

“You’ve no heartbeat,” she replied. “Is that quite normal?”

He shrugged. “It’s always been this way. This is as close to a ‘heartbeat’ as I suppose most Fay get.” He stopped, looking at her with something like wistfulness in his eyes. “What does your heartbeat sound like?”

Sakura stopped moving, hurting for the longing in his eyes. She took off the stethoscope, cleaned the ear pieces, and passed it to Tobirama with a smile.

He watched her with awe, taking the stethoscope gingerly. Slowly, Tobirama situated the instrument, holding the diaphragm with slightly trembling fingers. He looked her over, taking in her open, patient expression and soft clothes.

Tobirama hesitated.

Sakura took the diaphragm, pressing to the bare, warm skin beneath her shirt.

Tobirama gasped as the steady, unfaultering beat of a heart thrummed strongly in his eardrums. It surrounded him, drowning him in the fleeting, yet strong presence of mortal life.

It was absolutely mesmerizing.

“Do other monsters have hearts like this? Ones that...ones that beat?” Tobirama asked, removing the ear pieces from his ears.
“Some do certainly,” Sakura said, thinking of the Uchiha and of Kiba. “Not all surely.”

Tobirama nodded, still dazed.

Sakura smiled at him, grabbing the stethoscope and putting it away. She pulled the clipboard into her hands once more. “All seems to be well on that front. If we could check your weight?”

Tobirama nodded, moving through the motions as Sakura measured him and questioned him about his dietary habits and any issues that disturbed his daily routines.

Finally, Sakura tucked the pen behind her ear and gave Tobirama a gentle but firm squeeze of his shoulder. “It looks like everything is in order! Is there anything else you’d like to cover today?”

Tobirama fidgeted with his hands for a moment before nodding. “This is a little embarrassing but my antlers have come in recently and they’ve been...well they’ve been itchy.” He looked faintly embarrassed though Sakura couldn’t see why. “I was wondering if you’d take a look?”

“Certainly,” Sakura said, a little off-balanced.

She looked away as gold light spilled out from Tobirama. Sakura could feel the power rolling off him in waves. When she returned her gaze to him, he sported large antlers that stretched high above his head. Jewelry dripped from the antlers, glittering and sparkling in a way that caught the eye and held it. Sakura was a bit concerned that his antlers would scrape against the ceiling of the room.

“I’m afraid I can’t reach them,” she said faintly, a wry smile tugging at her lips.

“Of course,” he replied, choosing to kneel against the floor.

Sakura could see his scalp and the way the antlers twisted out from above Tobirama’s ears, beneath his white hair. She pulled on her gloves, brushing delicate fingers along the base of the antlers.

Tobirama shuddered.

Sakura pulled her hands away immediately. “Did I injure you? Perhaps you should see Tsume; she’d be better versed in this…”

“You’re doing fine,” Tobirama said, red eyes glancing up at her. “Does there appear to be any swelling or irritation around the base of the antlers?”

Sakura mussed his hair about, stroking soothing circles into the sensitive area around the antlers in a way that had Tobirama nearly seeing stars. She remained obviously, searching for signs of discomfort.

“There doesn’t appear to be anything of concern here,” Sakura said, stepping away. “I would think the itchiness comes from the growing of a new pair of antlers. If it keeps up in the next few weeks, I would strongly suggest going by the veterinary to have them looked over.”

Tobirama nodded, standing once more. “Thank you for your assistance, Dr. Haruno. Truly, I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome,” Sakura said, leading him back to the front.

“I’ll come by and pay the bill in a few days,” Tobirama said, smiling down at her as he brushed his hand over hers.

“Ah, Kakuzu!” Sakura exclaimed, looking at the man who looked very out of place and
uncomfortable in the faded cushion car in the clinic’s small waiting room. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“I’m early,” he said in a rumbling voice, poison green irises set in red sclera intently focused on Tobirama.

Tobirama resisted the urge to shiver.

“I’ll be back in a few days,” Tobirama promised, heading for the door. “Try to keep out of trouble, doctor.”

Sakura snorted, shaking her head as she waved him off. She turned her attention to Kakuzu, demeanor softening. “How are you doing, Kakuzu?”

“I’m well,” Kakuzu replied, standing.

“I know you made an appointment today,” Sakura said, grabbing his file, “but you didn’t specify. Did you want a physical?”

“That’d be great,” Kakuzu said shyly.

Sakura flipped open the file only to narrow her eyes on the single document within. Kakuzu had only been to the clinic once before. Nothing had been recorded on his weight or age or height. The only thing written on the document was a single sentence etched with a dark, shaky hand.

*DO NOT TREAT.*

Sakura scowled, tossing the document away.

“What’s wrong?” Kakuzu asked.

Sakura shook her head. “It’s only foolish ignorance.”

Kakuzu nodded and his eyes seemed sad. “You’re speaking of my last visit? My only visit?”

Sakura hesitated before nodding. “I apologize for whatever that doctor put you through.” She patted his shoulder. “It was unprofessional. More importantly, it was cruel.”

“It was a few centuries ago,” Kakuzu said in a husky voice. “I’ve moved beyond it.”

“You’re a good man, Kakuzu,” Sakura said.

Kakuzu did the best to ignore the way that made all four of his hearts flutter.

“Well, we’ll start from the top I suppose,” Sakura said, leading him into an exam room. “Hopefully it’ll be a better experience than the first time around.”

“Already is,” Kakuzu muttered to himself.

“Full name?” Sakura asked.

“Kakuzu.”

She glanced at him but he wasn’t forthcoming. She shrugged, moving forward.

“Step onto the scale please,” Sakura said.
Kakuzu did so.

Nothing happened for a moment. Suddenly, the numbers went crazy as the scale creaked beneath his weight. Both of them jumped as the scale cracked down the middle.

They stared at each other, Kakuzu a bundle of nerves.

Suddenly, Sakura began to laugh, full and deep from her belly.

Kakuzu was stunned for a moment. Then he joined in, relieved that she wasn’t angry with him.

“I apologize,” Sakura said. “It’s just...well, I’m surprised it didn’t happen earlier. This is Pompeii after all.”

Kakuzu chuckled, low and warm as he shook his head. “It is Pompeii,” he agreed.

“Do you have an estimate?” Sakura asked.

Kakuzu shrugged. “I exceed the limit of weight on all forms of transportation.”

Sakura’s eyebrows rose in shock. “Well...honestly, I’m not quite sure how to respond to that. I’ll just write ‘above four tons’ if that’s alright by you?”

Kakuzu shrugged his acquiesce.

“If you’ll stand up against the wall right here,” Sakura murmured, taking down his height.

Kakuzu did his best to ignore the heat of her body as she stretched up beside him, marking his height exactly. She was so close and so incredibly fragile.

“Now, I’ll check your heart, lungs, ears, and throat as long as that is fine by you,” Sakura said.

Kakuzu swallowed. “I should inform you that I do possess four separate hearts.”

“Where are they located?” Sakura asked.

Kakuzu indicated four different sections of his chest. “And I don’t have any other internal organs. Well, aside from my hearts and brain.”

“Huh,” Sakura said, marveling over the medical anomaly that he was. She had no idea how he was standing before her, alive. “Well, I’ll check your hearts, ears, and throat then.”

Kakuzu nodded, stripping off his shirt. He was left in his pants and face mask.

Sakura eyed the stripes that crisscrossed most of his body. What she’d thought were barbed wire tattoos when she first met him she now saw were messy stitches. They seemed to be holding him together. Without thinking, she traced a gloved finger over a line of stitches above his left pectoral.

Kakuzu nearly jumped out of his skin.

Sakura flinched away, face flushing in shame. “I am so sorry, Kakuzu! I far overstepped my boundaries.”

“N-no, it’s alright,” Kakuzu said, warmth igniting and lingering where she touched him. “I-I was just surprised.”
“Sorry,” Sakura said. “I was just wondering if those stitches were painful. They don’t seem to be professionally done.”

“They don’t hurt,” Kakuzu replied. “They’re a part of me just as everything else is.”

“Again, I apologize. It was very rude of me.”

Kakuzu shook his head, unconcerned as he watched her check his ears and listen to each of his different hearts. He wondered if she could hear how fast they were beating.

“Well, your hearts are quite healthy as are your ears,” Sakura said. “Now I just need to check your throat and we should be alright.”

Kakuzu hunched his shoulders up around his ears.

“Would you prefer not to have me check your throat?” Sakura asked.

“No...it’s fine,” Kakuzu said. He centered himself, wishing briefly to have lungs so that he could take a deep breath, and rolled down the mask.

Sakura examined his face. His eyes were bright and deep set in a dark and handsome face. His chin was strong and his cheeks sloping. Yet the thing that most drew her attention were the rough sutures around his mouth. The fear in his eyes made her eyes and smile gentle as she said, “Open your mouth please?”

Kakuzu did so, waiting for her to recoil in fear as his long thread tongue lolled out of his mouth.

She did not, merely pressing a tongue depressor against it as she shined a light deep into his throat. She made a soft humming sound.

“What is it?” Kakuzu did his best to ask around the depressor.

Sakura’s grin widened at the garbled question and replied, “Do your insides consist of the same threads that make up your stitches?”

Kakuzu nodded slowly. “They tend to be thicker than the ones that are on the outside but yes, similar consistency.” He paused, swallowing before deciding to take a leap of faith. “It’s actually the reason that I made an appointment today.”

“The threads?” Sakura asked.

“Yes.” He shut his eyes and threw caution to the wind for the first time in his entire life. Long, wisping tentacles appeared from within him. They moved about freely. Well, all but one. One tentacle hung limp and lank, nearly lifeless. “I need your help with this.”

“What happened?” Sakura asked, tentatively taking the tentacle from his hands. She could see the gaping hole at the center of the threads, a nothingness that hurt her heart.

Kakuzu shuddered at the sensation. The threads were him, he was the threads; he felt everything. It was the first time the threads had ever been treated tenderly.

“Brushed up against a holy spell,” he said, wondering if this was what it was like to feel breathless. “The others have healed but this one has not. I can self-regenerate but I fear these threads are somehow infected.”

Sakura nodded slowly. “I can certainly try cleaning out the wound. There might be some residue of
that holy spell left behind. I’ll spray it with disinfectant and wrap it. If it is causing you a lot of pain, I can prescribe a mild pain reliever.”

Kakuzu nodded, watching in awe as Sakura gently cared for his injury, unheeding of the fact that he was so strange, so different. She didn’t mind him for what he was.

She didn’t care that he was a monster.

Sakura was a bit enthralled with the texture of the tentacle. It was solid but made up of a large mass of bumpy threads that all twisted together. Even through the gloves, Sakura could feel the odd texture. Without really thinking, Sakura rubbed circular patterns along the tentacle. She quickly caught herself, flushing and busying herself with finishing her task.

Kakuzu remained silent.

Sakura wrapped bandage around the tentacle, blinking as the tentacles disappeared back into...well, wherever they came from. She wrote out a prescription note and passed it to him after he pulled back on his mask and shirt.

“Stop by Chiyo’s on your way home and she’ll fill the prescription. Please come back by in a week or two if this treatment doesn’t prove effective,” Sakura said kindly.

“Thank you, Dr. Haruno,” Kakuzu said.

Sakura grinned up at him, patting him on the shoulder as they headed back to the front of the clinic. “Don’t mention it.”

“The bill?” he inquired.

“Don’t worry about it,” Sakura said, eyes dancing.

“But-!”

Sakura laid a hand on his arm to placate him. “To make up for that horrible first experience.”

“That was centuries ago!” he blustered, beyond surprised.

Sakura’s smile was wide and bright, a glittering mark in a sea of darkness. “You deserve better. Besides, Pompeii seems to be a place of second chances. I hope you’ll consider the clinic again in the future.”

Kakuzu looked down at her, trying to comprehend this woman. He did his best not to melt beneath her touch. “Without a doubt. I’ll be seeing you again soon I’m sure, Dr. Haruno.”
There was an abundance of vehicular transportation in the town of Pompeii, as is the case with most towns, but for the most part people liked to walk and take the long ways. Pompeii was a place set aside from the busy strain of time and space. What did a creature who lived two centuries care about the time it took to walk.

Sakura had grown used to the quiet of the street outside her clinic. There was a small parking lot around back, but most of her patients walked in and the road out front was never too noisy.

She jumped when she heard another pick up truck full of laughing boys rumble past, towing something that rattled. A quick glance out the side windows told her it was a flatbed with a flapping blue tarp concealing the items underneath.

“What the heck, that’s the fourth or fifth one in the last half hour. Why are there so many of them?” Sakura huffed out loud, not really expecting an answer.

“Sakura?” She turned to see Shizune’s confused expression. “What are you talking about?”

Sakura ran a hand through her slightly wavy hair, still soft from the shower. “Nothing important. There have just been a lot of trucks and trailers going down and it’s louder than usual. It’s nothing worth getting worked up over. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

But as soon as the words were out of her mouth another loud puncturing sound cut through the still and Sakura turned with Shizune to see a smaller delivery truck with metal poles sticking out of the back. The windows were down and loud music was blaring. Sakura groaned, rubbing behind her ears.

“It’s not a big deal,” Sakura repeated, more for herself than Shizune.

The older woman smiled knowingly and chuckled. “Oh, I had forgotten how they like to get rowdy in the set up. They’re starting early this year.”

Sakura turned to look over at her coworker and frowned. “What?”

Shizune’s eyes went wide and she made a small O with her lips as she was struck with a thought. “You don’t know about it! Oh, no one ever told you and you haven’t been here that long.”

“No one’s ever told me what?” Sakura felt uneasy. “What are you talking about?”

Shizune laughed and touched a hand to her mouth, as if that would help keep the sound trapped. “Oh, no, nothing that terribly important. It’s a Pompeii thing. In over a week we will be celebrating our Founder’s Day. It’s…a small silly little celebration, or it was supposed to be. The kids make it into a big and bigger deal each year. I hardly recognize it, but there’s games and events and food.”

“Founder’s Day?” Sakura echoed.

“It used to be a simple picnic. Now…ah, there’s even a reenactment.” Her eyes drifted in a fog and it was as if she was remembering something from long ago. “They even used glitter last time.”
Sakura didn’t want to interrupt Shizune if she was busy reminiscing, but she still felt a bit uneasy at the idea of a celebration for something she didn’t understand or know anything about. She was still new so it would be okay for her first time if she just kind of observed, right? She was sure they had their own traditions and customs she wouldn’t know about. The mention of glitter was only a little bit disconcerting.

“Should I be worried?” Sakura asked.

Shizune looked to Sakura and her eyes widened before she tried to cover up her surprise with a smile. “Well, I don’t think it’s anything worth…worrying about. Our celebrations might be a bit different if you’re used to living in a secular or mixed environment, but if there’s something that you don’t understand we’ll be there to help.” She paused and Sakura saw the thought behind the other woman’s eyes before Shizune mentioned the next part. “And the Volcano sacrifice hasn’t been decided yet, so there’s still a chance you’ll be just an observer.”


“Oh, not a literal one. It’s just a reenactment trick they love to pull. You see, Founder’s Day is all about how the town of Pompeii was founded, and the story is as old as dirt, even if some of us are older. There were once five individuals who set out to make a place where people of their kind could be safe. They found this land and it was guarded by a volcano god. They fought it and won in the end by throwing in their ‘sacred maiden’ to the volcano’s opening.”

“Oh, that sounds fake, but okay….” Sakura was hesitant to even say that much. It was Pompeii, but the whole over the top action story seemed a little too story like.

Shizune nodded, agreeing. “The story’s changed a bit over time, but yeah, that’s how the elders remember it. Their maiden defeated the volcano from the inside and was shot out in the end to help her group found the town. So she’s not really a sacrifice, but Haku was whining about it so much two years ago the name just sort of stuck. That boy’s too pretty for his own good, considering how much he whines.”

Sakura’s uneasy feeling came back to her and she decided it was probably better she was new and too unknown to be properly dragged into the heart of preparations. “Can this sacrificial person, actor, maiden chosen against their will?”

“Yeah, the elders take a whole year to decide who gets sacrificed as the maiden on Founder’s Day.”

Sakura let a breath she didn’t know she had been holding go. Okay, maybe it would all pass without dragging her into the center of attention and she could just relax and enjoy from the sidelines. The whole idea of a holiday with games and food and activities to watch was actually sort of interesting. She hadn’t been to anything like that since Coney Island when she was just a child.

“Is there…” Sakura felt silly as she shuffled her feet. “Do you think there is something I could do to help out? I want to participate and integrate myself into the community. What do you do?”

Shizune laughed, settling her hands on the curves of her hips in a knowing way. “I bake, of course. You have any idea how many pies we go through? And mine are nearly as famous as the Akimichi ones.”

“Maybe I could donate something baked.”

Shizune reached out and pat down some of Sakura’s wild hair before rubbing a thumb over the girl’s cheek. “Yeah, that’s a fine idea. Whatever you want, we’ll take on Founder’s Day in a week and a
half from now. We’re still just getting ready for it, you know. Until then, keep helping out this community the way you already do.”

The door leading to the back parking lot rang and Sakura remembered the bell was working again. She had thought it broken when Tobirama had visited her yesterday, but it worked perfectly for everyone else. She figured it was a fay thing and resolved to investigate it later on in the files…if only there were files on fay patients.

“Wow, speak of the devil, or angel, you pick,” Shizune snickered, leaving Sakura to go back to her desk and check the visitor in.

Sakura left her desk duties behind to pull on her white coat and pull her hair free before crossing the room around the wall to see who Shizune was checking in. Sakura had a few other appointments at the end of the day, but the morning looked free for walk ins until she met Ino for lunch.

“Dr. Haruno,” the young woman greeted, smiling sweetly. “I’m glad to meet you after all the good things I’ve heard.” She extended her hand and Sakura shook it firmly, surprised by the strength of the grip.

“Thank you, that’s great to hear after so short a practice here,” Sakura joked. “Are you here for a walk in?”

She nodded and then looked to Shizune who was putting papers together on a clipboard. “Just fill this out, Haku, we’ll be with you in a minute.”

Haku pouted and Sakura struggled to keep a straight face as her memory went back to several different conversations. Haku took the papers on the clipboard and Sakura discreetly went behind Shizune for Haku’s file that had already been pulled. It was thin, not many visits, and very clear about his sex.

“No wonder they chose him as the maiden,” Sakura barely whispered to herself when she looked from the picture in the file to the boy in the waiting room. He was way too pretty, it made her a little envious.

“Is that all?” he asked, standing a little too close for how little she heard of his approach. Sakura staggered but righted herself and smiled easily.

“Yeah, why don’t we go into room one and I’ll have us start with the basics?”

“Of course,” he answered easily. He seemed to glide as he moved, walking ahead of her. Sakura remembered hearing about Haku from both Kisame and Zabuza, but seeing him in person was a new matter. But all that aside, he’s her patient and she had a job to do.

Sakura made herself a perfect doctor that didn’t get distracted as she led Haku through the first few steps of the physical: height, weight, eyes, ears, throat, and lungs. All of it looked good. But then Sakura noticed an odd shimmer to Haku’s arms and asked him if she could inspect the site. When he flinched and looked away she wondered if she had asked too much.

“It’s…actually the reason I wanted to come in,” he admitted without meeting her eye. “The scales won’t go away like they should. It’s never happened before, but Kisame and Zabuza both had issues so I thought I might benefit from a second opinion.”

“You’ve been swimming in the same lake.” It wasn’t a question.

“It’s the only lake big enough to be worth swimming in. I don’t have another option.”
Kisame and Zabuza both said they would try to stay out of it as much as possible, I suggest you do the same, but not to the point where it is detrimental to your health. Have you showered or cleaned this area since leaving the lake?

“I tried, but it didn’t help all of it. I mean, there was a lot more than this, but I was able to get those patches to go down. This is all that’s left.” He swallowed and then added. “All I used was regular water, though.”

Sakura nodded and left to get some different things out of the cabinet. “Let’s see if we can clean that area and make the scales go back down. Did Zabuza and Kisame tell you about their own conditions and what happened to them?”

Haku smirked and it was a deceptively beautiful thing. “You had to clean out their gills.”

Sakura didn’t know if she was supposed to be unnerved by his smirk, but she was too deep into her doctor mode to be moved out of it. She had a job to do. “Yes, there was residue that was making them sick. I’m going to check for the same on your scales and try to clean them a little more thoroughly.”

“Yes, they don’t hurt and it’s not really that big of a deal…” Haku began to say, but shut his mouth when he saw how determined she was. “But I appreciate it,” he finished.

Sakura coated a cotton swab in disinfectant and began to clean the site. As she expected, the residue that didn’t come off with soap and water began to break up and peel away like dried silly putty. Sakura was careful to remove the once invisible coating to prevent any of it from settling in between Haku’s scales. It was a slow process, but Sakura was hyper focused on keeping her hands steady and her work neat.

Minutes later, the last of Haku’s scales seeped back into his skin and melted into flesh, completing his transformation. He gasped in delight, running a hand over his skin to feel the lack of scales. It was smooth to the touch.

“You did it.”

Sakura hummed in agreement, keeping a baggie with the residue inside. It was very much like what she pulled from Zabuza and Kisame, but it came away differently and she had a bad feeling in her gut that she should have this tested as well. She wrote down the date Haku had told her he had last been in lake Icarus as well as the date of his visit on the baggie. When she looked up, Haku was watching her.

“I’m sending these samples to the lab as well. I want to get to the bottom of your lake problem as quickly as possible. This time it was something minor, but if you keep swimming in that lake you could actually start losing scales. There have been documented cases of this happening before in cities outside of Pompeii. Can I assume that you’re going to tell this all to Zabuza and the others?”

Haku’s smirk was back in place. “Yeah, I guess I’ll eventually tell them I came to visit the new doctor. They’ll be put out to hear I didn’t invite them along, but that’s enough for me. I’ll let turtle face know about the samples.”

Sakura grinned at the endearing nickname and only assumed Haku was strong in the youngest child complex. He acted like one. “I’ll get you set up to leave. I won’t take up much more of your time.”

Haku hopped off the counter and followed her out, staring at her strangely while she drew up the finishing paperwork and readied a copy for him to take home. When she turned around he was closer
than before, invading her personal bubble. She backed up half a step and he followed.

“I was curious about the girl who made both my seniors so star-struck. It would be easy to do with
Kisame. He’s not used to anything or anyone being kind to him. I could see how your attention
would make someone like him so entangled. But Zabuza’s nearly raised me and he’s a stone pillar of
emotions. I never see him so much as crack a smile around anyone but our group… unless he’s trying
to scare them. And then there’s the boss. I don’t want to even think about how you got old turtle face
wrapped up so nicely.”

Sakura snorted, thinking back to Sasuke’s silly little squabble. Haku was no different. Sasuke was
jealous for the attention of his older brother, and Haku wanted the attention of the man that nearly
raised him. She picked up his papers and bopped him lightly on the nose with them.

“It’s a phase, honey. Don’t get so worked up over it. I’m here to do a job and make sure you guys
are safe and healthy in Pompeii. You don’t have anything to worry about or feel intimidated by.”
The thought almost made her laugh. Haku was too pretty to ever be jealous of someone like her.

The taller boy flushed a pretty pink and took the papers, blinking fast. “I-I know that!”

“I’ve included a prescription for you to fill. Take it to Chiyo and she’ll give you what you need.”

Haku’s eyes were roving, searching for something. “You-you’re not flustered at all. What are you?”

“That’s not polite to ask.” Sakura tapped his papers and started to turn back to her desk. “You’re free
to go. I have a lunch date I need to get to so if you need me you can find Shizune and make an
appointment.”

“You call me?” Shizune asked from the other side of the room, beyond the wall that divided the two
waiting rooms.

Sakura chuckled and turned back to her desk and turned the monitor for the computer screen back
on. She had a new patient file to update before Ino came to pick her up.

Haku watched her with a light blush still dusting his cheeks before he took a step back, and then
another. He backed away slowly like she was a great and terrible animal that could rip him apart in a
moment. His eyes were so fixated on her as he backed out that he backed right into a small trash can
and stumbled with arms flapping to grab onto the counter and keep himself upright. Sakura looked
up, ready to ask if he was okay but Haku jumped back up with a eep sound and scurried the rest of
the way out.

“Was that normal for Haku?” Sakura asked to Shizune.

The older woman laughed. “Not since he was a little mer boy. I don’t think he’s used to such
straightforward treatment. You know he’s so pretty he’s used to a little more… flattery.”

“I can believe that.”

Ino came a little later and together the two of them found a food truck that liked to hide in different
places all over Pompeii, leaving behind cryptic clues as to it’s next hiding spot. Ino was a sleuth that
always knew where it was.

“I wouldn’t try so hard, but their food is to kill for.” Ino handed Sakura another napkin as the pair sat
with legs dangling off the ledge of the wall they sat on.

“I was craving pot stickers, how did you know?” Sakura laughed, tearing into one.
Ino’s smile is all knowing. “I know these things.” She popped an egg roll into her mouth, chewed, and swallowed before washing it down with tea. “What I don’t know is how you’re doing. Tell me stuff. Your life is super busy now.”

“Not really,” Sakura mumbled over her foot before swallowing and going on to tell Ino about a lot of different things that have happened when she’s not treating others. She ended when she got to the part where Shizune and her were talking about the upcoming Founder’s Day celebration.

Ino licked a couple of fingers before squinting at something in the air. “They’re pitching the tents not far from here if you want to peek and have a look. It’s slow business but they have ten days.”

“What are they getting started so early?” Sakura asked before taking another sip of her tea. It was still warm and she loved how it coated her insides all the way down. She was more interested in food than anything else.

Ino shrugged. “Maybe they want to show off and make it bigger and better. They grow every year, you know.”

Off in the distance something dull echoed before a resounding crack drew Sakura’s attention to the far sky, in the opposite direction of where Ino said the tents were being pitched. Sakura saw a dark bruise crackle in the sky before expanding and then shrinking to a pinpoint. Thunder rumbled in reply.

Ino huffed. “The black spot in the sky is Kakuzu and I’m pretty sure Pein’s playing with the thunder again. Those two are such cocks, I swear. You can’t leave them alone in the same room without one fighting the other. I have no idea how they do business together.”

Sakura felt her eyes widen. “That’s Pein and Kakuzu? What are they doing?” The noise was so loud and the dark spot in the sky was close. If she had to guess they were between the gas station and then renovated business offices operating out of a decommissioned light bulb factory. That was maybe two blocks away?

“They’re fighting again.”

Sakura felt her throat go dry. “What?”

Ino nodded, nose wrinkling. “Yeah, they haven’t done that in a long time, but I remember seeing it once. They must be arguing about their cults or something. I hope they don’t raze the Shell Station, that’s the cheapest place to get gas in town. Eh-Sakura! Hey, Sakura!”

But Sakura had left her food behind and was already sprinting back up the way they had come, gaining ground easily. She heard another crack and more thunder rumbled as a roaring made the sky shake. She thought of Pein, a fearsome old god who was used to getting his own way, and Kakuzu who was an eldritch beast in his own right, breaking scales and frightening doctors. She couldn’t think of two people more likely to do damage and harm if engaged in a fight. It would be more than cuts and bruises. She could only imagine the things she couldn’t heal and it made her heart pound.

She saw the gold light of a rotating shell sign and pushed herself to run the last bit of the way until she saw the two of them standing on opposite sides of the pumps, looking fierce. They were far away from the gas stands, but Pein was still crackling with wind and lightning while Kakuzu loomed in his own fierce way. Behind him fissures of dark yawned open and closed, each one providing her a window to a netherworld full of horrors.

Sakura didn’t stop running, even when she heard their energies charging around them. She passed
between the pumps and her footsteps drew their attention at the same time, both paused to look to the
side and reacted in ways all their own. The wind fell away from Pein and Kakuzu collected his
threads back into himself as Sakura stumbled and fell onto her knees between them. Both rushed
over to help her.

“Sakura!”

“What are you doing, silly girl?” Pein chastised, kneeling down alongside her while Kakuzu did the
same. She was breathing hard.

“Stop…fighting.” Sakura sucked in air and remembered how to breath again. She wasn’t out of
breath anymore. “You’re going to hurt someone, or yourself. Stop the fighting. I don’t want anyone
to get hurt.”

“You needn’t worry for something as trifle as this squabble,” Pein replied, looking across her to
where Kakuzu still glared. Pein’s eyes still flashed dangerously, but he wouldn’t try anything in front
of Sakura.

“It wouldn’t have been a big deal,” Kakuzu tried, unsure of what to say. He had never had anyone
interfere or even worry enough to care about him before. This was new to him. “We weren’t going
to not recover from any of it. You know we’re hardier than that.”

“That’s not the point!” Sakura huffed. “I didn’t want either of you to fight because I didn’t want
either of you getting hurt. I-I don’t like it when people get hurt. It’s my job to help them heal but I
have my limits, and I can’t always help as much as I want to. You can-no, just…no, don’t hurt each
other. I don’t want to see either of you getting hurt regardless of how strong or durable you may be.”

She could see it too clearly in her head, bodies cut open, left open, lives lost, empty eyes. She’s seen
men and women die plenty of times, but in the city she saw some of the grizzly ways people can die
and some of the ways they can suffer before they die. She didn’t want that for either of them.

Pein reached out and touched her face. Sakura flinched at the contact, but blinked in question when
she saw his fingers come away wet. Tears. Had she really been crying? She never used to cry over
her patients, it was one of her best traits. From her other side she heard Kakuzu suck in a breath.
When she turned towards him he was watching her with green, glowing eyes. They were
captivating, just like Pein’s.

“You were so worried about us?” Kakazu asked in a whisper while Pein watched the tears collected
on his fingertips.

“Of course, who wouldn’t be? I was afraid you guys were going to get hurt!” She wiped her face
with the back of her wrist and was grateful when her voice never wobbled. “Don’t scare me so much
ever again. I thought you were both going to be in real trouble.”

Pein laughed, still holding her tears like treasures. “What an idea! I doubt true harm could be done
over such a silly squabble.” He shifted his focus to the other man and his voice dropped. “Kakuzu,
keep the grain percentage. I’ve attained something more valuable than currency for an offering.

Kakuzu looked to Sakura first and then he nodded. “I’ll back off today as well. I don’t see it as worth
the effort anymore.” His voice was softer when he spoke to Sakura. “I won’t abuse your worry for
me.”

Sakura felt herself deflate a little. “I’m sorry for overreacting, if that’s what you think I was doing.”

Kakuzu chuckled and Pein’s sly smile as he dropped her tears into a glass vial from inside his pea
coat pocket made her feel all the more silly. Kakuzu seemed hesitant to move, but he touched the fabric of her jacket and brushed a thumb over the wrinkles at her elbow.

“I would never think that of you,” he answered, voice soft.

Pein made a sound like a huff before the glass vial between his fingers vanished with a trick of magic. “As if any man or woman on this earth would find issue with being worried over by such a kind hearted goddess. Save your apologies sweetheart, we’re not worth it.”

“And, no more fighting over silly things.”

“Promise.”

“Of course.”

Yes…of course. This was Pompeii after all.
Chapter 12

Sakura glanced out her window, frowning at the torrents of rain coming down along the streets. It’d gotten so bad that the Founder’s Day preparations had been put on hiatus until the weather cleared up.

She couldn’t help but wonder if Pein was causing this storm.

Sakura rolled her eyes, because of course it was Pein.

He had a flair for dramatics.

She wasn’t sure what made him angry this time but at least he wasn’t fighting with someone else.

Sakura glanced back down at the book she’d been reading and closed it firmly. She hopped to her feet, grabbing her phone and shooting off a text to Ino.

Her phone buzzed and Sakura grinned as she answered the call.

“Hi Ino!” she sang.

“Just call me your savior because I’ve got a plan to change this drab day upside down.”

Sakura snorted but found herself smiling. It was still surreal to be able to speak with her penpal and hear a voice put to her words. “Oh yeah? And what does this plan entail?”

“You getting your ass over here and bringing those divine brownies that you made a couple days ago. That is, unless you ate them all.”

“I’m not like you, pig,” Sakura teased lightly. “I have some brownies leftover.”

“Whatever, forehead!” Ino replied. “Choji left an umbrella for you the last time we were over so just bring that. I’ll see you in fifteen minutes!”

Sakura chuckled, placing her phone in her pocket as she headed into her bedroom to collect her stuff. She glanced in the mirror, taking in her loose tank top, visible sports bra, and baggy sweatpants. She shrugged, pulling her hair up into a messy bun as she grabbed her keys, the brownie pan, and the faded pink umbrella with dancing cats as she headed out the door.

She blinked at the wall of water that greeted her as she opened the door.

Sakura braced herself, unfurling the umbrella and stepping outside.

She started walking, marvelling at the rivulets of water that streamed down the street around her. The air crackled with electricity and the scent of ozone hung heavy and thick. The sky was dark and grey with clouds.

It was all rather normal for a storm.

Sakura scowled as she tried to figure what exactly was bothering her so much about the rain. There was something off about it; something eerie.

She figured it out as Ino’s little townhouse came into view.
Sakura’s hairs stood up on end as she realized that no rain fell upon her umbrella. There was no weight from the water, no pitter-patter from the little droplets, no sound at all.

Sakura stopped, fumbling with the umbrella as she moved it away from her body.

In a small, perfect circle around her, no rain fell at all.

Sakura swallowed, looking up to the sky.

It offered no explanations.

She scurried up to Ino’s house, closing the still dry umbrella as she unlatched the gate.

Ino owned a small brick house that she shared with Choji. According to the both of them, Shikamaru was a frequent couch surfer even though he didn’t technically live there. Both Ino and Choji’s parents did have sprawling homes in Pompeii of their own, but they understood their children’s need for independence. Ino did confess to Sakura that she stayed in her childhood home every other weekend.

Sakura walked up to the door, tucking the umbrella up against the wall as she knocked.

The door swung inward and Sakura found herself staring up into smiling brown eyes.

“Hi Choji,” she greeted, giving the man a hug.

Choji returned the hug easily, taking the tray from her hands. “Brownies huh? Ino’s told me stories of these legendary brownies.”

Sakura flapped a hand, embarrassed. “Can’t compare to yours, I’m sure.”

“Nonsense,” Choji tutted, guiding her further into the house. “This will pair well with dulce de leche I made earlier. We’re having balsamic chicken for lunch, hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. Just wondering if I’m a little underdressed here,” Sakura replied.

Choji looked at her and away quickly, color rising high in his cheeks. “You look wonderful, Sakura.”

Sakura’s brows rose as she heard voices from the kitchen. “Is this some sort of party?”

“Ino didn’t tell you?” he asked, pity in his eyes.

They pushed into the kitchen and Sakura immediately began cursing Ino out in her head.

There were over a dozen people around their age in the large, open kitchen, milling around and carving...gourds?

“Sakura!” Ino exclaimed, shoving her way past the others in the room as she threw her arms around her friend. “Am I your savior or am I your savior?”

“You could’ve at least given me a heads up,” Sakura whispered, flushing as she saw how nicely everyone else was dressed. Certainly, she’d met some of the people in the room but many she had not.

Ino kissed her on the nose and ruffled her hair. “You are adorable.”
Sakura wrinkled her nose, pushing her taller friend away. “Alright, alright, introduce me, savior.”

With a swagger in her step, Ino slung an arm around Sakura and shouted out, “Alright everyone, this is Sakura!”

“Penpal Sakura from elementary school?” a man wearing sunglasses asked.

“Hell yeah!” Kiba said, bounding over to her. He was bouncing with energy as he stared down at her, fangs obvious. “How’ve you been settling in?”

“Taking it day by day,” Sakura replied with a smile. “I’m a bit surprised I haven’t had you in the clinic again.”

Kiba laughed, scratching one of the triangle marks on his cheek. “Well Tsume’s been patching me up at the veterinary. She says I shouldn’t overwhelm you as I could probably sustain your business on my own.”

“Good to know,” Sakura said, crossing her arms as he spoke about his reckless escapades. She warred between professional urges and the boundaries of acquaintanceship. Eventually she settled on saying, “Try to be careful, will you?”

“No promises,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah, Kiba,” Ino said, pushing past him. “We all know you’re more bark than bite.”

Sakura smiled at him apologetically as Ino guided her away.

“So you’ve met the Uzumaki twins and the Uchiha brat,” Ino whispered in Sakura’s ear. “Who haven’t you met here?”

“Me,” a voice said.

Sakura turned, curious about the way she could feel Ino stiffen a bit beside her. The woman who stood before them was curvy and tall, with sharp tortoiseshell glasses. Her hair was shaped in a chic manner and the burning red trademark of most members of the Uzumaki clan.

“Hey Karin,” Ino greeted. “Didn’t realize you were back from your training journey already.”

“Mito-sama let me go early because of Founder’s Day,” Karin replied. “We have to get the clan grounds prepared for visitors.”

“So this is a really big event,” Sakura said, knowing visitors were a rare commodity.

“Yeah, bigger than any of the more commercial holidays,” Karin said, smile wry. “It’s been around for centuries now so we’ve perfected our techniques.”

“So the gourds?”

“We carve them, dry them out, and let the witch covens light ’em up as a spectacle for the town,” Karin said.

“Yeah, the apprentice witches aren’t that advanced, but some of the master witches can animate the scenes carved in the gourds,” Ino said.

“They can enlarge ’em too so as to entertain the children.” Karin grinned. “Don’t expect much from apprentice witches though.”
“Don’t let Tayuya hear you say that,” Naruto warned, stepping up into the conversation with a bubbly smile. “Even though she isn’t a master, she’ll whip your ass.”

“As if she could catch me,” Karin said with a haughty raise of her chin. “While you have never been the best at illusions, Mito-sama says I’m the best of our litter.”

“Whatever,” Naruto replied. He caught Sakura’s confusion and explained, “This brat is my younger cousin.”

“Older cousin, dumbass,” Karin said.

“Yeah by about three hours,” Naruto muttered.

“Still older!”

Sakura watched them interact with something of a wistful smile. She was an only child and didn’t have any close relatives. It was nice to see the closeness of the Uzumaki family.

“They’re going to be arguing for a while,” Ino informed Sakura, tucking her hand around her elbow and dragging her off to another section of the room. “Longest clocked time for an argument was a little under four hours.”

Sakura whistled lowly, a bit impressed in spite of herself. She’d never spoken that long in her life.

Ino took her on a whirlwind meet-and-greet of the party guests that strangely reminded Sakura of speed dating. She could remember only a smattering of names and she only hoped that she’d get to know them better during the preparations for Founder’s Day.

“Take one of these,” Ino said, passing Sakura a cold bottle.

Sakura took it, taking in the homemade label on the bottle. It was obviously Fall themed, with bright leaves and lots of reds and oranges.

“Pumpkin beer?” Sakura asked, looking at Ino quizzically.

“Yeah, we’ve got a brewer here with all sorts of speciality drinks. Trust me, it’s absolutely delicious. Choji’s contemplating bringing him in as a partner at the restaurant,” Ino replied.

“That’s pretty neat,” Sakura said.

Ino sat Sakura down at the long table covered in gourds and carving tools. And she quickly abandoned her, cursing loudly about “dumbass Uzumaki always getting out of hand.”

One woman sat beside a large tub full of water, cleaning out the innards of some gourds. She wore a mask over her mouth and nose.

Sakura furrowed her brow.

“I-it’s the mold spores,” someone said quietly.

Sakura looked up at the speaker, smiling as she took a seat. The woman was extremely pale, with milky eyes and long dark hair that fell in sheets around her face. She was beautiful in a soft, feminine sort of way.

“Mold spores?” Sakura asked.
“That’s why Hanabi is wearing the m-mask,” the woman explained with a shy, timid smile. “So the mold spores don’t get into her lungs.”

Sakura narrowed her eyes on the woman’s face, trying to place her. “Hinata, right?”

“Yes,” she replied, expression pleasantly surprised and pleased. “You remember me?”

“Well, Ino gave us about a thirty second introduction but yes, I remember you,” Sakura said.

Hinata nodded. “Ino is a bit...exuberant at times.”

Sakura snorted at her delicate choice of words. “She certainly is that. She’s a wonderful friend regardless.”

“What are you going to carve into your gourd?” Hinata asked.

“Unfortunately I’m not the most artistically inclined,” Sakura replied. “What do people usually do?”

Hinata turned her own large gourd around, displaying a beautiful scene of two women kissing upon a boat under large pine trees.

“Well damn,” Sakura muttered, slouching into her chair. “I have no chance.” Hinata fluttered anxiously, trying to assuage her worries. Sakura brushed them off, laughing. “Honestly it’s fine. I’ll figure something out.”

Hinata nodded hesitantly, getting back to her own gourd.

Sakura stood, heading over to the woman cleaning the gourds. “Any chance I could get one of those, Hanabi?”

Hanabi looked up, pale eyes curving up into a smile beneath her mask. “Sure thing!”

“Are you by chance related to Hinata?” Sakura asked.

“Guilty as charged!” Hanabi said cheerfully, standing and removing her mask before passing a gourd to Sakura. Her face was round and eyes mischievous. “I’m a bit surprised that Hinata approached you herself. She’s becoming something of a social butterfly these days.”

“H-hey,” Hinata protested as they took a seat again at the table.

“Just speaking the truth,” Hanabi said with a shrug.

“Be kind,” Sakura said, picking up a paring knife.

Hanabi stuck out her tongue at Hinata before pulling her mask back on. “Back to the toxic fumes!” she said in a muffled voice.

“Do we really need this many gourds?” Sakura asked, slightly overwhelmed by the sheer quantity around her.

Hinata nodded. “Definitely. There are shows and theatrics and contests centered around the gourds.”

“Hm,” Sakura said, working at carving a traditional jack-o’-lantern face. While it wasn’t a scene like the other gourds were, it was something Sakura liked. There was a sense of nostalgia that fell heavy against her chest as she reminisced celebrating her favorite holiday surrounded by friends and family and the sickeningly sweet scent of candy corn.
“I-I should probably go,” Hinata said, biting her lip. Sakura followed her gaze to a man with long hair whose argument with Sasuke was getting louder and louder.

“Do what you need to do,” Sakura said, catching the family resemblance. She felt a bit bad that Hinata obviously had to deal with some headstrong personalities within her close family.

“T-thanks,” Hinata replied, scurrying off toward the brewing fight. “Maybe we can catch up later?”

“Definitely,” Sakura promised. “Feel free to drop by the clinic any time.”

“And you are welcome to the Hyuga bank,” Hinata replied with a dazzling smile.

Sakura waved her off, returning her attention to her gourd. The eyes were unsymmetrical and different sizes, but it was obvious that they were eyes.

Now onto the nose.

“That is the ugliest gourd I’ve ever seen,” a monotone voice said. “And I’ve been around for a few millenia.”

Sakura looked up into the dark sloe eyes of a man she hadn’t been introduced to by Ino. His hair was fine and straight. She blinked in concern as she caught the fact that his skin was paper white.

“Ugliest gourd, huh?” Sakura asked. “I suppose you aren’t a fan of the abstract or Halloween.”

The man just stared down at her blankly.

She shook her head, smiling to herself as she got back to work on her jack-o’-lantern. He could be a jackass if he wanted, Sakura was going to do her own thing.

She didn’t look up as he took the seat next to her, grabbing a gourd of his own. They sat in silence, working in tandem. Honestly, it felt peaceful, just immersing herself in the art.

“This is what art looks like,” the man said.

Sakura glanced over, taking in the yellow gourd. She recognized the scene. It was Pompeii itself, delicate and intricate. Sakura could almost swear she could touch the spiky pine needles on the trees and smell the heady earthy scent that defined the town.

“That’s absolutely lovely,” Sakura said, leaning in to see it even better. She pointed at one building. “You even got the clinic in there!”

“Of course,” he huffed.

“I hope this is one of the ones the witches use for demonstration,” Sakura said, gently tracing one of the edges.

“Well they certainly won’t use Deidara’s,” Ino said, taking a seat by Sakura. “Not after he blew up that gourd in an apprentice witch’s face 47 years ago.”

Sai’s face darkened at the mention of Deidara. “I am the official artist for Founder’s Day,” he said, “much better than that dullard.”

Sakura opened her mouth, prepared to ask about the elusive Deidara. She paused as something tugged at her behind her bellybutton. Sakura frowned, glancing down.
Then it hit her.

She paled, glancing at Ino. “I have to go,” she said apologetically. “I’m being summoned. This has been lovely, we need to do it again soon.”

Ino furrowed her brows and began to respond.

Sakura was already gone, warping back to the clinic. She stumbled slightly, disoriented and nauseated for a moment.

Then her vision cleared.

“Gaara?” she asked, snapping into professional mode.

He stood at the door, soaking wet as his sand covered something else. His eyes were desperate as he stared up at Sakura.

“Help him,” he said, a thready plea in his voice. He didn’t comment on or even seem to notice that the rain didn’t touch Sakura as she ushered him in, mindful of the sand.

“Put him on the bed,” Sakura ordered, pulling on her gloves quickly. She was still in her lazy clothes but she didn’t have time to change. She compromised by slipping her lab coat on. “What happened?”

“We...we were out on the trail,” Gaara said, sounding distant and remote. Sakura had the feeling that he was beginning to dissociate. “Chiyo needs certain plants for her medicines and Kankuro has been slacking off recently. He decided to go out today. That’s when the rain started.”

As Sakura listened she checked Kankuro’s pulse, concerned with the purplish-black quality clearly visible in his veins. His pulse fluttered weakly and he released a long, low groan.

“He fell headfirst over the edge of a cliff. I...I’m not quite sure what he fell into!” Gaara said, sand vibrating around him with agitation.

A quick glare from Sakura made the sand settle. “I’ve never seen anything like this,” she said.

“C-Chiyo…” Kankuro groaned.

Sakura’s eyes widened. “Gaara, go get Chiyo. Tell her to bring her poison-treatment supplies.”

Gaara disappeared in a whirl of sand.

Sakura brushed the hair back from Kankuro’s face, grimacing in sympathy as she saw how sweaty it was. “I’m here, Kankuro,” she said. “You aren’t alone.”

She went over his different injuries, assessing each and every one of them. He’d lost some blood, but his injuries didn’t appear too serious. All except his arm.

Sakura could tell he’d caught his weight on that arm and a bone protruded beneath the skin. Long gashes scratched up the arms and Sakura could tell they weren’t just from scraping up against the rocks. If her hunch was correct, this was the source of the dark colors spreading rapidly through his veins.

She grabbed thick bandage, wrapping it tight around Kankuro’s left bicep. He squeaked, flailing weakly against her. Sakura gritted her teeth, fastening straps around his wrists and ankles to restrain his limbs.
Then she returned to his arm, tightening the bandage to limit blood circulation. She was working on a tense timeline and she couldn’t afford to make any mistakes.

“What’s the big idea, summoning me here like that? I won’t stand for it!” Chiyo squawked as she and Gaara appeared in the room.

“What did you send him to find?” Sakura demanded, cutting her tirade short.

“I…” Chiyo’s breath rattled past her teeth as she caught sight of Kankuro’s prone body.

“What did you send him to find?” Sakura asked again.

“A few things,” Chiyo replied. “Hemlock, wolfsbane, dragonsbane…”

“Dragonsbane?” Sakura asked. “Is this a typical reaction to dragonsbane in the bloodstream?”

Chiyo nodded shakily. “Yes, it affects most monsters this way.”

“And how do you counteract it?” she asked.

“It’s a mix of the dragonsbane, baby’s breath, and holy water,” Chiyo said.

“Holy water?” Gaara asked. “Are you trying to kill him?”

“The dragonsbane negates the holy water, boy,” Chiyo snapped.

“Focus!” Sakura said, breaking their argument. “Do you have the ingredients here?”

“Yes,” Chiyo said.

“Then let’s get to work,” Sakura said grimly.

She watched as Chiyo assembled a flask, a piece of baby’s breath, and a plant with bright orange thorns. Sakura shook her head, grabbing an empty shot and prepping it to inject directly into Kankuro’s bloodstream. When she turned back to Chiyo, Sakura saw that her hands were shaking and that she nearly spilled the holy water.

Chiyo cursed under her breath.

“Here,” Sakura said, “let me. Just tell me what to do.”

Chiyo looked up at her with keen dark eyes. “Careful girl.”

Sakura took over, listening intently to Chiyo’s instructions. Finally, it was complete and Sakura poured the concoction into the beaker. She squeezed out the air bubbles, tapped the side of the glass, and injected the needle into the underside of Kankuro’s left arm.

The three people stood intently, watching Kankuro. His breath became less raspy and he settled into an exhausted sleep. Sakura monitored the way the color in his veins receded, making notes in his medical file as she waited for him to wake.

The slithering of sand signaled Gaara’s return.

“Chiyo is back home,” he reported.

Sakura glanced up, closing the file and smiling kindly at him. She could see the way fear tightened
his eyes and fists and she wanted to assuage him.

“He’s past the worst of it,” Sakura said softly. “His body is on the mend and he just needs to rest.”

Gaara nodded but his gaze didn’t move away from Kankuro.

“How about you give Temari a call?” Sakura tried, wanting to distract him from his anxieties.

“I did,” Gaara replied. “Got her voicemail. She’s out of town.”

Sakura accepted his explanation, gesturing for him to take a seat. Gaara poured himself into the seat, exhaustion ringing his entire form.

“He’s going to be alright,” Sakura said, grabbing one of his hands and squeezing as she tried to push comfort into him. “I’m going to keep him overnight for observation. I doubt you want to leave his side. You’re welcome to one of the beds.”

Gaara shook his head. “I’ll stay up.”

Sakura glanced between him and his brother, finally nodding her acquiescence.

He never let go of her hand.
Chapter 13

Kankuro made a full recovery, but Sakura’s hand would take a little longer to heal and get the feeling back in it. Gaara had held her hand all through the night in anxious worry, holding it even after she fell asleep in a chair by Kankuro’s bed.

When she woke in the morning, it was a few hours before dawn. Gaara’s brother was already stirring and she could see the signs of recovery. He’d be a bit groggy for the next day or so, she told Gaara, but it would be no worse than what happens during and after a cold. He would be right as rain in time for Founder’s Day.

“Thank you for mixing the Holy Water.”

Sakura frowned, thinking that an oddly specific thing for him to thank her for. “It was no problem.”

Gaara nodded, looking down with a soft blush across his cheeks. “It’s not easy to find someone who is brave or willing enough to handle both Holy Water and Dragon’s Bane. Even Chiyo is weary and he handles both more than anyone.” He paused to swallow before glancing up into her eyes again. “Most of our kind, most people in Pompeii are deadly fearful of one or the other, but you handled both without flinching. We haven’t even known you that long.”

“Gaara,” Sakura nearly laughed, smiling softly at the boy who was looking more and more like a frightened child. She drew him close and stood on her tiptoes to draw him into a hug where his face buried in her neck. She pat down the back of his head, combing through his hair with her short nails in small circles. She felt him shudder in her arms and deflate a bit. He must be exhausted.

Sakura was still in the sweats from yesterday and she didn’t doubt she had smelled better, but Gaara didn’t seem to mind as he all but melted into her arms. She remembered what he had said to her the first time they met. A sandman who can’t sleep. She didn’t know how he could still function, but she knew that no matter what he was, sleep was good for his soul. Gaara needed rest just as much as his brother.

Sakura rocked on her feet, softly back and forth, nearly unnoticeable. She hummed into the side of his head and traced circles into his back. When he went boneless she caught him with one arm around his back and the other slipping under his legs.

One of the things she remembered being teased about the most in med school was her stupid strength. A critique of nurses and female med students in the program was their lack of upper body strength. The sexist male interns made it a point to help their chances of being hired over their female competitors. Sakura never let that become an issue for her.

Gaara wasn’t heavy as she carried him to the far wall where a second, pop out cot waited. She rolled it out using her foot and pulled it close to Kankuro. Sakura set Gaara down on his side and he instantly curled up like a child, fingers still caught in her lab coat. Sakura slid it off and laid it over his body like a blanket.

The sand on the floor stirred when she began to step away, but Sakura went right back to Kankuro’s side and checked his vitals once more. She glanced down at the sand, sensing it’s agitation.

“I won’t let anything happen to either of them.”

The sand settled and Sakura breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed like both boys would be able to recover this way.
Sakura brought her laptop into the room and booted it, prepared to update a couple of files and do some searching on dragon’s bane and Holy Water.

Sakura didn’t have a lot of date digitalized, so she wasn’t expecting much, but a handful of files popped up with the search words highlighted. Kakuzu was one of them, having listed Holy Water as one of his ‘allergies.’ There were several she recognized and several she didn’t.

Doing some detective work, Sakura extrapolated a pattern in the patients who needed Dragon’s bane as a medication and used that knowledge to pull hard files and update the database. It was slow work that would take days, but it was easy and fast and Sakura felt herself learning as she muddled through the files. Everything she read made her a better doctor. Everything she studied made her more helpful to the people in her new home.

She read and worked until the sun was up and Kankuro stirred.

“Ow.”

“Our mighty hero awakens,” Sakura chuckles, closing her laptop and setting it aside. Her eyes are tired and she knows she needs a good shower and a change of clothes. “How are you feeling, hot stuff?”

“Not so hot. Ugh, I want to wash myself and get changed. I feel like I’ve sweat enough for a sauna visit.”

“That’s your body getting rid of all the crap it doesn’t need. Here, I’ve been wiping you down while you slept but I wasn’t intrusive. If you’re feeling up to it you can use this room to wipe yourself down. I’ll give you and Gaara some privacy.”

“Gaara?” Kankuro blinked, searching the room and then tensing when he notices his brother. “Shit, he’s sleeping.”

“Yeah, he was exhausted.”

“No, he’s sleeping.”

Sakura nodded. “Yeah, I get it. He needs it though, so don’t wake him up. I’m giving you your privacy now. Temari should be back later today to pick you two up. If Gaara’s not awake by then I’ll let you leave, but the two of you need to recover first, doctor’s orders.”

Kankuro nodded meekly, glancing sideways at Gaara before returning his gaze to her. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Sakura grinned and shut the door behind her, slipping into the hallway. Thankfully, she could hear Shizune in the office room making coffee. Sakura poked her head in and asked if Shizune could watch over the boys and keep things under control while she went upstairs to shower and change.

“Have you slept?” Shizune sounded mortified at the implication that Sakura would skip her sleep.

“A little. I’ll be fine. This is nothing compared to what it was like in med school. Ah, I’ll be back in a jiffy. You’re a huge help, Shizune!”

Shizune looked worried but let Sakura go, promising to keep things under control until she got back. Sakura didn’t take long in the shower, and rushed through getting herself cleaned and dried off. Grabbing her shoes she skipped barefoot out of her apartment and down the stairs, resolving to slip into her flats once she touched down on the landing. Only when she saw the clinic as she left it did
she breathe a sigh of relief.

Holding her shoes in one hand, fingers hooked into the heel, sakura tiptoes into Gaara and Kankuro’s room to find them both resting with only Kankuro awake. He saw her and smiled, waving a cell phone. Sakura crept closer and he sat up in his bed, showing her the text.

“Temari is coming by in a few minutes to pick us up and take us home. I told her Gaara was sleeping and she dropped everything. With the way she travels, we won’t have to wait long.”

“I’ll get your paperwork ready. I’ll also send word to Chiyo that you’re doing better.”

“Ah, don’t do that last bit, I’ll see her soon enough on my own and she just wants to make sure I’m not dead because of her. She’s crabbier than she looks.”

Sakura hummed, teasingly. “That quite the accomplishment.”

Sakura slipped out to get the dismissal paperwork together and was startled when half the windows in the clinic rattled in their settings before the front door blew open for Temari to float down. She stepped like something made out of air and rushed for Sakura, eyes wet.

Temari grabbed Sakura in a tight hug and picked the girl up, turning her around and crying happily. “Thank you so much for protecting my family!”

Somewhere in the background Shizune had turned on the radio station for background noise and Sakura heard soft whispers of a quiet girl singing as Temari cried fat, wet tears. Sakura just hugged the girl back and let her ride out of her emotions until the stress and anxiety was spent.

“Sure, no problem.”

The rest of the day and following night was not nearly as eventful. Sakura went to bed a little earlier than normal, knowing tomorrow would be Founder’s Day, and a day her clinic was closed (except in cases of emergencies.) She set the timer on her clock with the intention of getting actually dressed up for the day and taking the morning to just self care a little.

Sakura grinned through a mouthful of pie. “Mmm, I don’t know if it’s good. I need another slice to make sure.”

Shizune tried to look upset and sound angry but the giggles came too easy. “Sakura, that’s the third slice. I’ll have nothing left to take.”

Sakura licked apple off her lips and grinned, feeling too childish to mind. “Too bad you couldn’t make another dozen more, right?”

“That’s not the point. You’re supposed to be helping me.”

“I am! I’m quality control. You don’t want to serve something sub par.”

“I want to be able to serve something.”

Sakura licked her fingers clean, not caring about germs or her health for once. “You know, Kimimaro is going to have a whole tone of business next door with all the cavities that come out of this. We should probably get our heartburn stuff out.”

Shizune clucked disapproving as she wet a napkin and ran it over the bottom half of Sakura’s face. “You smeared your make up.”
Wrinkling her nose Sakura pulled away and laughed, taking the wet thing and finishing the job with a reflection caught in the glass of the nearby window. “That’s fine. It’s just gloss and I’m more worried about having fun than how I look. You really think I’m worried with people like Haku and Ino out and about?”

Shizune hummed knowingly, the way a mother would hum with her daughter. “I think you’re plenty gorgeous.”

Sakura snickered, cheeks coloring. She felt giddy and happy and it was impossible to hide. “I’m really looking forward to today.”

Sakura took a tray of goodies, double checking to make sure her brownies were there, and followed Shizune out. The door to the clinic closed behind them with a pleasant jingle and Sakura remembered in the back of her mind that there were no fay nearby.

The whole main road leading to the town’s central part was closed down for the event and no one seemed to mind. Along the way Sakura felt her eyes catching like fabric on hooks every time they passed a new tent or booth. There was a funhouse of mirrors, small rides, and plenty of art tents where people sat down to paint moving tattoos. There was a palm reader and a tarot cart, plus plenty of places where food was being served.

It was almost like a renaissance festival or a state fair, but those events were commercialized and charged for everything. There wasn’t a hint of that no matter where Sakura looked. The food was all donated, and everyone seemed content to share their talents and time for the celebration.

“This is amazing,” Sakura breathed, steps slowed. She couldn’t see everything at once like she wished she could, and had to slow down.

“Thisover here!” Ino’s voice sucked Sakura’s attention away and she turned to see her friend holding up a tray of caramel apples. “This way to the snack table, forehead.”

Sakura hurried to catch up with the other women, spotting Hinata and Hanabi from yesterday spooning chocolate covered pumpkin seeds into trail mix baggies. A boy with long brown hair and pearl colored eyes watched them with a scowl and arms crossed over his chest. His bad mood didn’t seem to dampen the spirits of the two girls, as they giggled about something and made the boy blush even more.

There was a main tent that was left empty for an event that would be held later in the day and then there were other tents along the way set up with tables for people to leave their foods. Sakura walked with her friends until they found a table with a spot for their pies and brownies.

“There would have been more if someone didn’t indulge herself first thing in the morning,” Shizune sighed, eyeing Sakura sternly.

“Sounds like her,” Ino teased.

Sakura giggled and Ino just rolled her eyes before grabbing onto Sakura’s arm and dragging her out to get vapor scarves from the foglets. Towards the edge of the event there was a colorful tent made out of patches of fabric, left open to both sides and backed up against the trees. A line of people waited to sit on a stool and have the little blue people craft scarves of fog that drifted and danced around the volunteer’s neck for ‘thirty to forty minutes’ in this weather.

Sakura watched in rapt attention as a young mer girl had a foglet spin a scarf that spun like ocean waves, shifting into whales over half turn. Another boy had his scarf turn into geometric shapes and
another adult had theirs shift into birds.

Ino went first and demanded an assortment of flowers to bloom in and out around her with a smile no one could say no to for long. The foglets took this in stride and began to rapidly work on the fog scarf. Sakura watched the small creature that kept to the shadows spin it’s hand over hand. Foglets were tiny and thin with eyes half the size of their head and wide leaf shaped ears. Sakura doubted they were as tall as her knees but they were springy things that scurried quickly.

Ino’s scarf was finished in less than thirty seconds and it was just as amazing as Sakura suspected it would be. Roses and daisies bloomed and folded back into fog to become carnations and tulips. It was a never ending revolving fog scarf of different flowers.

“Your turn,” Ino chirped.

Sakura nodded and took a seat on the stool, feeling nervous. It was only as she sat down did she realize she didn’t know what she wanted. Flowers? Whales? Unicorns?

“We know you,” a voice croaked from the deepest shadows in the tent. A older, wrinkled foglet hopped up, stopping inches from Sakura’s feet. “Pein has told us of you. His rain has sang of you.”

“M-me?” Sakura squeaked, making a note to remember that Pein and the creatures who controlled fog were on good terms. It made sense; both were weather makers.

The elder foglet hopped up onto her lap and grabbed her face between its hands. Foglets were sexless creatures that chose no gender except in rare cases. Sakura kept still while the creature studied here. “I will make your scarf. You have request?”

“I-“ Sakura swallowed. “I would be honored if you would choose something for me.”

“Ah. This one knows the old ways. Manners, manners, only the gods know manners….”The fogglet pat her cheeks and then jumped back. Straightening he clapped his hands and shooed the other creatures away with a laugh.

Sakura felt a pull in her gut as the air darkened and the creatures hands began to spin faster than any of the others. Milk seeps and wept in weightless form before hissing out in fog that snaked around her neck, loose and circling. Sakura felt like a planet, orbited by satellites as the floating scarf began to take on form.

Sakura saw a comment falling, glittering, bright. It touched down on earth and wailed with the figure of a man before sinking into the earth to sleep and glitter. The giant grabbed a piece of land and covered himself with it like a blanket, and Sakura saw the earth glow red from the crest of a volcano. Another layer of fog overlapped her scarf and critters like knights on horses tried to approach the mount but were all wiped away. Warriors in spear, decorated officials, and rag tag thieves tried to steal the mountain for themselves, but all failed. One came close, a woman on her own, but she was swallowed up in wood.

Then there were five small creatures, not quite human, not animal, not anything that Sakura could label. They didn’t come in war but in peace, and to show this, the one with trailing hair made from starlight threw herself into the mouth of the volcano.

Ah, but the volcano loved her and there was no harm. She came out on a rolling wave of red love and lava, down into a valley they could call their own. Where once there were four there were ten, and then twenty, and then there were so many Sakura couldn’t see them all.
The scarf looped again and Sakura saw the comment fall to earth and the story started up again.

“Sakura?”

The called upon girl looked up to see Ino waiting with a confused expression. “What did you get? I can’t see what your scarf is.” Ino’s nose wrinkled as she glanced down at the old foglet backing away with a knowing smile. “It gave you an enchanted one.”

“You can’t see what it is?” Sakura asked, standing and giving up her seat to the next in line. It had only been a minute on the seat, but it felt like hours. Reaching up she rubbed her eyes and found them moist, but not wet. Strange.

“I think it’s made out of sakura blossoms, or some small creature, but I’m sure that’s not what an elder made for you. Still, it looks pretty from here. Don’t mind me. What do you want to do next? I’m yours for as long as you’ll have me.”

“Let’s see who we can find.”

Ino looped her arm through Sakura’s and the pair set out to find and make trouble with the other inhabitants of Pompeii. Together they visited a few stalls, watched a few performers, and sampled a few goods.

Ino was quick to sniff out several of the friends she had invited to her party yesterday and most had fun trying to guess what Sakura’s scarf was. A boy in glasses named Shino thought it was made out of beetles and another girl with her hair up high in twin buns guessed it was a scarf of throwing stars and ribbons. Kiba came up and declared that it was for sure made up of dogs and everyone was probably blind, especially Naruto who insisted those were foxes and not dogs.

“Are you going to watch the tourney later?” Naruto asked when Menma came in to take over Naruto’s role of arguing with Kiba.

“What’s that?” Sakura asked.

Naruto pointed to the big field left open and blank. “There we have teams of four compete in games until all but one are eliminated. At the end of the day that winning team gets to shove the sacrifice into the cannon to be shot out in glitter. That happens at sundown and it sets off the second part of our Founder’s Day. You know, the really fun stuff starts at night. It’s the perfect time for all the fire shows!”

“Hn, as if your fox fire was worth looking at,” a new voice interrupted.

Naruto whirled to stand in front of Sakura and bare his teeth at Sasuke. “What was that, bastard?”

Sasuke shrugged and then smirked. “I don’t know who you think you’re fooling, when it’s clear the Uchiha are the best fire performers in the country.” Sasuke tilted his head to the side and then grinned at Sakura. “My brother and I are on a team so of course we are going to win the tourney.”

“Oh, who else is on your team?” Sakura asked, tone pleasant and unwilling to fall into the confrontational tone he wanted. He was either trying to impress her or intimidate her, and Sakura suspected he was trying to do both.

Sasuke blinked and then looked down at the side, shoving his hands into his pockets and relaxing his posture. “Hn, my cousin and Uncle.”

“No fair,” Naruto whined. “Madara is too powerful to be on someone’s team. Why is he even
trying? He’s an old guy.”

“He has the maturity of a human child, that’s why,” Sasuke bit. “Hn. Also, he said something about being impressive in front of someone or something. And you know that the Senju brothers are competing this year too…all four of them.”

Naruto crumpled to the ground. “We’re doomed.”

Sakura knelt down beside him and rubbed his shoulder in support. “It’s okay, you should still try your best and have fun. It’s Founder’s Day, remember?”

Naruto looked up, eyes glistening with crocodile tears. “Then will you eat a slice of pie with me Sakura, before I go off to my death? My only wish is to consume sugar with you.”

“Oi,” Menma barked, leaving Kiba to kick Naruto in the shin. “What are you saying? You have any pride?”

“What, you can join in too.” Naruto kicked back and then set his hands on his hips before turning back to Sakura. “The events are going to start soon. Wanna go watch the first round?”

Sakura nodded, reaching for Ino and glancing at Sasuke before smiling up at Naruto. “Sounds fun.”

“Ino,” Naruto mumbled, smiling and blushing even though it looked like he was trying not to.

Surprisingly, it was Menma who had a picnic blanket for the group to spread out on. When Naruto complained that it wasn’t big enough for all his friends Menma snapped about his brother being too stupid to pack his own. It made Naruto fake cry and Sakura laughed at how Sasuke only added insult to injury. Menma bristled at that and started attacking Sasuke with verbal slurs. It was not hostile enough to be uncomfortable and Sakura ended up laughing.

Kiba ran off to steal the blanket Hana, his older sister, had packed for them, and laid it down next to Naruto’s. A few other friends laid out close by and Sakura was about to comment on how hard it would be to get up and get food when Naruto and Sasuke both shot up, hearing the first few words and guessing the rest.

“I got it!” Naruto cried the same time Sasuke barked, “Too easy.”

Both were gone in a flash and Menma groaned in their absence. Ino snorted, pulling Sakura back to lay her head down on her lap. Sakura giggled at the feeling while Ino played with Sakura’s loose, wavy hair. Sakura loved the feeling of fingers in her scalp.

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There were eight different teams that assembled to compete for the title, and the first game was an elaborate ring toss even where contestants had to throw knives called Kuni through rings tossed by their teammates…but all of them were blindfolded. The first team had a couple of kids and their parents working together and they did okay, but then the second team came out and Sakura sat up when she saw who it was.

Kisame smiled wide at the competitors, unnerving the younger kid before Zabuza could hit the blue skinned man over the head and drag him onto the field where Haku and another boy with white hair and shark like teeth waited. Sakura sat up and little to watch and was so wrapped up in the games when Kisame and Zabuza proved to be a deadly accurate force. Haku and the boy named Suigetsu were too keen to the movements of their mentors and hit the mark every time.
At the end with a perfect score, Kisame removed his blindfold and cheered loudly. Sakura clapped along with the rest of the audience and called his name in praise. It was a loud crowd, but the blue skinned man turned and spotted her on the grass and staggered. His boastful grin turned bashful and the giant fin folk seemed to diminish as his cheeks colored a light shade of purple. Haku snipped something rude and Suigetsu shouted an insult back, forcing Zabuza to drag the both of them off. Kisame looked like he wanted to step towards Sakura, but a bark from Zabuza made him rethink it and turn to follow his teammates.

“They’re as amazing as ever, but that’s what you get with masters and apprentices,” Ino commented.

Naruto snorted. “They weren’t that great.” He looked over at Sakura and picked up the plate of pie he had taken from the tables. “Hey-hey, Sakura, want me to feed you?”

“She can do that herself, idiot!” Ino hissed, tugging Sakura further back and onto the blond’s lap. She glared warningly at Naruto.

Sasuke snorted and pushed his plate closer to Sakura. “Here, I got extra on accident. I didn’t get any for you, it’s just extra. Eat it if you want, I don’t care.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Sakura laughed, taking some of the pie for herself. She set it on her lap and partitioned out a healthy portion of cherry pie to fork into her mouth. She hummed in delight around her fork and winked when she caught Sasuke staring. He turned away, face red, to concentrate on the fight between the Senju and a team called team Might, made up of a father son duo and two other individuals Sakura had seen before, named Tenten and Neji. Both pairs did beautifully, but the Senju squeaked out a victor by one ring.

Naruto had to leave with Menma to join Karin and Tayuya who reserved no mercy for a coven of witches. Tayuya especially was overly vocal about their victory, shouting about how she was the baddest witch and some other things that had parents covering their children’s ears.

The last victorious team was the Uchiha, but that was a miracle because Madara was a peacock on the field, taking every opportunity to show up, wink and flirt with the crowd (especially the section Sakura was in) and put his wings out on display. It made Sasuke hiss in anger more than once and they almost lost on account of their bickering on the field, but Itachi smoothed things over and they were flawless the rest of the game.

There was a long break before the last set of games and during that time Sakura found herself swarmed with faces trying to take up the elbow room. The Uchiha were the worst, especially Madara, who used his wings more than once to push others aside and drape himself over her.

Sakura felt a tug on her wrist and looked up to see Itachi, face calm. He touched his lips and a moment later Sakura fell through a cloud of black feathers and landed in front of the fun house alongside Itachi. She wobbled, falling against his side. Teleporting was always a trip.

“You seemed swamped.”

“I was,” Sakura laughed, looking up with grateful eyes at her savior. “But you’re going to hear hell from Shisui and Madara when they find us.”

“Let’s not let them find us then,” he said, tugging on her arm and leading her into the funhouse of mirrors with a sly sort of smile Sakura didn’t see coming. She felt butterflies in her stomach for a moment and let him tug her along.

Sakura’s scarf had all but faded, even after lasting longer than Ino’s, but she felt cold at her neck.
when Itachi carried her in. She turned to the side and caught a reflection of the pair of them in one of the mirrors. Itachi’s wings were out and covering them.

Sakura reached up before she knew what she was doing, and traced the bone’s curve in his wings. Itachi stilled, eyes blown wide before he reacted. Sakura felt his wings shudder and drew her hand back too quickly, as if burned.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I’ve never seen your wings before, I shouldn’t have, I know. I’m sorry I did that.”

“No,” Itachi folded his wings against his back and tugged on Sakura’s arm to bring her closer to his side. “I hadn’t realized I let…I usually keep my wings to myself. I’m not known for being as cavalier as my uncle or cousin. I should apologize for startling you. You weren’t used to seeing… those.”

“But, they’re beautiful. You shouldn’t feel you need to hide them if you don’t want to, at least not with me. I think they’re lovely,” Sakura admitted.

Itachi’s wings shuddered again and he drew them tighter as he smiled off to the side, trying to hide his smile as color bloomed on his cheeks. “That’s… a kind thing to say. I’m jealous for your words, so I’m quite grateful to hear your praise right now. I wouldn’t have shown my wings to just anyone, but I feel comfortable showing them to you, like this here.”

Sakura beamed. “Good, I want you to feel safe to share things with me.”

Even in the dim lighting of the fun house Sakura could see the color on Itachi’s cheeks as he struggled to hide his blush. She grinned, thinking it cute before tugging on his arm and leading him along.

There were many different types of mirrors, and Sakura found them all funny. She had dressed in high waisted jeans and a simple button front floral, but when she stepped in front of the warped mirrors she looked like she was a walking garden box. Itachi, somehow, managed to look good in every mirror they passed in front of, even the fat one.

“You look so cute, like a teddy bear worth holding,” Sakura chuckled, stepping up behind him in the fat mirror.

Itachi didn’t seem amused until she stood beside him and looked just as absurd. His hand reached for hers and tugged her closer until they were rubbing elbows. She could feel his feathers through the fabric of her shirt sleeve; they were warm.

“I’d much rather hold you.”

Sakura felt her face grow hot as the Itachi in the mirror started to bend down closer to her face. Just when she felt she was going to skip away and run, he pressed his lips to her hair and then pulled back to put her at ease. Sakura shivered at the feeling in her stomach. This felt way too much like flirting and she wasn’t-

“ITACHI!”

Sakura flinched at the shrill cry and Itachi cursed, tugging her close and shooting up into the air. They circled once and then fluttered down to the ground where Sasuke was panting. He glared at Sakura and then at his brother, seemingly angry at both of them for some reason.

“What happened?” Itachi asked, voice impassive.
Itachi didn’t seem nearly as flustered as Sakura felt and she held onto that thought, hoping it would help calm her. Teasing. Just teasing. She took a breath and moved past her nervousness.

“Madara and Tobirama got into a fight again. Both teams got disqualified and you missed it.”

“Was I supposed to mediate? I am not our uncle’s better, nor am I his keeper. He should have known to keep his temper in check. Tobirama baits him too easily.”

“You weren’t there, you don’t know who baited who.” Sasuke crossed his arms and frowned. Hearing a noise, he peeked up and scowled at Sakura before turning his head off to the side.

“We’ll have to endure his moaning about the unfairness of it all, but it is nothing we have not heard before. Is that all you came here to say?” Sakura noticed Itachi’s wings were gone, put away where she couldn’t see them.

“No,” Sasuke stuttered, looking between the two. “The next event is going to be the last one, so we’re going to watch. I came to get Sakura for Naruto. He said he wanted her to see him get his ass handed to him by Kisame. And I don’t know what’s true, but I’m willing to bet she’d rather be with everyone else than alone with you.”

Itachi bristled, as if he hadn’t expect to hear that from Sasuke.

“What is the last game?” Sakura asked, not wanting to cause any more tension between the brothers. “Why does Naruto think he’s going to get his ass kicked?”

Sasuke blinked, lips quirking upwards. “Ah, wrestling. His opponent is Kisame. Menma is fighting Zabuza, Karin is fighting Suigetsu, and Haku is fighting Tayuya.”

“It sounds like…well, I could see how you think Kisame and Zabuza are favorites, but Haku is so…and-ugh, um…I think it might be close.”

Sasuke snorted. “Karin will kick Suigetsu’s butt, but that’s it.”

Itachi nodded, agreeing. He tugged on Sakura’s sleeve. “We should go back now.”

Sasuke narrowed his eyes at the contact. Before Itachi could start leading her anywhere a body flashed down between the two and grabbed Sakura. She squealed in surprise, grabbing onto whatever she could, heart pounding as the world around her spin.

Shisui laughed, holding her closer. “Ah, I’m glad that we got kicked out, now I get to hang out with you.” Shisui landing on the tip of a tent and grinned down at Sakura in his arms. “Did you miss me?”

“I’m dizzy, thank you very much,” Sakura chuckled, feeling her head still turn. “You wanna take me back to my spot on the blanket?”

“Why, so you can get swarmed? It’s so rare to have you out like this. You’re not wearing your lab coat and you’re not in doctor mode. I want to just hang out like this. You wouldn’t if it was any other day of the week.” He sounded like a whining child, selfishly wanting a toy without shame for how he begs for it.

“The others will be angry with you, don’t make trouble for yourself. Other than that, I do want to see the rest of the event, so please take me down from here.” Sakura looked up at Shisui and emphasized her words with furrowed brows. “Please, Shisui.”

He sighed, wings drooping. “As if I could do anything other than what you asked of me. Fiiiiine.”
His wings opened and he leap, catching the wind like a parachute and touching down like a leaf. Once close to the ground Sakura scrambled out of his arms and staggered on unsteady legs. He laughed as she walked, swaying dangerously.

“I think you’ve had too much to drink.”

“Not enough if I can still hear your voice. Ugh, help me stand. I need to walk back.”

Shisui took her arm and led her back to the grasses where spectators had laid out their blankets. Sakura was careful to not step on anyone or anything as she made her way back to the blanket. When she arrived Naruto and Menma were gone and Sakura was afraid she had missed the last major event of the day, but cheers went up as the wrestled took to the field, all wearing matching Judo robes.

“What did I miss?” Sakura asked in a whisper as she sat down next to Ino. The blond latched onto Sakura’s arm in an instant and tugged the other girl closer, making Sakura laugh.

“I don’t care how pretty he is, I’m skinning that Uchiha next time I see him. How dare he. You were gone for so long.”

“That was hardly thirty minutes.”

“It felt like hours!”

Sakura chuckled and then kissed the side of Ino’s head. The blond settled down and seemed content after that. Sakura leaned back on her elbows and crossed her ankles, watching the fighters in front of her. True to their predictions, both Zabuza and Kisame took Naruto and Menma down during either of their matches. It wasn’t as cut and dry as Sasuke made it seem, both twins proved more impressive than first predicted, but in the end they weren’t enough to best the veteran wrestlers. Both Kisame and Zabuza seemed trained in their art, and demonstrated style in their victory.

Like Sasuke predicted, Karin wiped the floor with Sugetsu. Karin came out like a beast and showed no mercy to the brash, young apprentice who seemed arrogant in his stances. Rolling over him after his surrender Kain laughed, brushing grass from her arms and waving to the crowd. She winked once and blew a kiss into the masses before swaggering off the field, hips swaying with the swell of victory.

Ino made a dismissive noise and waved at the field. “If Tayuya wins then both sides choose one victor to fight, but it’s Mizu’s win either way. They got lucky with a challenge that plays to their strength.” The blond’s eyes narrowed. “Plus, Karin won’t win against Kisame or Zabuza. She’s too talented in other areas.”

Sakura hummed, leaning forward to watch the new fight. She didn’t think Haku would win after seeing him in for a check up. He was too beautiful with a slight body full of lithe muscle used in swimming. Would that be enough to overpower Tayuya? Tayuya was a spitfire with unending energy. Both were young, and neither looked suited to wrestling, but the match began and the people of Pompeii leaned in.

“Ah, there she goes,” Sasuke snickered, watching from the blanket on the grass alongside Sakura’s.

Sakura held her breath as the two fighters engaged and grappled. Tayuya was a force of frenzy, but Haku had better holds. It would have been over quickly, but Tayuya used pure strength and concentrated will to break herself out of holds and get herself caught in new ones. Tayuya never found a form that would work for her, and never managed to catch Haku in anything, the boy was
too slippery and flexible.

Haku’s fight was the longest, but he didn’t seem tired at any point in the match. His smile was easy and almost sly as he met Tayuya at each new turn of the match. She was starting to wear down, but it would be awhile before she was noticeably tired. Sakura felt like cheering for the girl, even though she didn’t have any qualms about Haku winning either.

“Haku, enough playing around,” Zabuza barked from the sidelines.

There was a flicker of emotion across the boy’s face, but it was gone before Sakura could be sure she saw it at all. Haku moved into an offensive stance for the first time in the match and caught Tayuya in a hold. She struggled and he followed her to the ground where he pinned her. She screamed and cursed and thrashed but couldn’t get out from under Haku. His face was close to hers and Sakura saw him whisper something into her ear before her face turned red and she quivered before relenting.

Sakura watched as Haku smiled down at Tayuya before helping her up. He said something kind to her, face close, and Tayuya’s cheeks turned a darker shade of red as her ears and neck joined in the burning. When Haku laughed Tayuya cursed and looked away, unable to watch his face.

Ino sighed, dropping her head onto Sakura’s shoulder. “Everyone is a little in love with Haku’s face and he’s a devil about it. Tayuya never stood a chance. She has a thing for the girly ones.”

“It was a good show, they all did amazing. I don’t think I could have managed half as well,” Sakura laughed. “It’s a shame that’s the end of it.”

“End?” Sasuke echoed.

Ino smiled, lips sly and eyes bright with mirth. “Sakura, that’s not even close to the end. Night’s about to begin and that’s when the fun really starts.”
Chapter 14

“What happens at night?” Sakura asked, turning to Ino.

Ino’s smile was wide and secretive as she gestured to the changing colors of the sky. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

Sakura snorted, half-heartedly pushing Ino’s shoulder before laying back down in her lap. “To make up for your cryptic attitude, you may play with my hair.”

Ino laughed but obliged her friend’s silliness. Her fingers carded deep in Sakura’s hair and began braiding different sections of the waves. “Did you bring a coat? It’s going to get rather cold.”

“I...I didn’t,” Sakura said, glancing down at her jeans and flowery red blouse. “I thought the celebration lasted until sundown.”

Sasuke and Naruto exchanged looks and immediately fell to bickering. Sakura wasn’t sure what it was about but she sighed regardless.

Something fell on her face, obscuring her view of the sunset. She sat up sputtering.

“There,” Menma said, refusing to look at her as heat suffused his cheeks. “That’ll keep you warm.”

Sakura glanced down at the large leather jacket. It was lined on the inside with what appeared to be some type of soft, downy faux-fur. She bit her lip, looking up at Menma shyly. She was honestly a bit surprised he’d even offered. “Thank you Menma,” she said, placing her hand on his. “Are you sure though? I could always run home. I don’t want you to be cold.”

Menma snorted, fangs flashing as he gave her a smile. “Please, have a little bit of faith. I’m kitsune; I’m made of fur, better than that jacket too. Besides,” What looked to be black fire appeared in his hand, “I always have foxfire.”

Sakura nodded, shifting around as she slid into his jacket. It was incredibly warm and smelled of ash and cedar. Sakura laid back into Ino’s lap.

Both Sasuke and Naruto stopped fighting, turning angry gazes onto Menma who looked entirely too smug.

Ino shook her head, returning to braiding Sakura’s hair and ignoring the boys’ pissing contest.

“We probably need to get going,” Naruto said reluctantly, scratching a hand through his hair. “We need to get prepared for tonight.”

“And I’m guessing you won’t be telling me what all is happening tonight, will you?” Sakura asked sweetly.

Naruto glanced between her and Ino before wisely shaking his head. “I’ll leave that to Ino. Make sure you watch for the foxfire! Mine’s the best!”

Menma scoffed, shoving his brother as all the fire users stood.

“Menma!” Sakura called. Menma paused and turned back to her. “Thanks again!”

Menma nodded, smile soft as he gave her a lazy wave and headed off.
“So what do we do now?” Sakura asked, looking up at Ino from her spot in her lap.

“Well,” Ino said, “with everyone preparing for their parts tonight, the line for food is probably pretty short.”

Sakura grinned, leaping to her feet and wrapping the leather jacket closer around herself. “You had me at food.”

The duo weaved arm in arm through the chattering crowd, making their way to the open pavilion laden with food.

“Choji!” Ino exclaimed, throwing her arms around him. “I should have known you’d be over here!”

Choji nodded, glancing between the two women and then down at the pie he was holding. He flushed.

“What are you up to?” Ino asked gleefully, beginning to fill a plate with the smattering of different types of barbeque.

“Trying to figure out if any of the Fae have used ingredients from their realm,” Choji replied, scrutinizing the pie with a closer eye.

Ino froze. “What?”

“We have a few outsider Fae visiting us this year,” Choji explained with a sigh. “Hashirama only just informed us that a group of Fae from Ireland was joining his Ring for Founder’s Day. You know how forgetful the Fae can be; live a couple of millenia and the human rules become much less important.”

“Don’t let Tobirama hear you talking like that,” Ino said. “He prides himself on his Fae heritage a bit much.”

“Well, Pompeii’s Fae have always been rather attentive,” Choji replied. “They deign to live among other creatures, unlike most of the Folk.”

“The Folk are generally isolated, then?” Sakura asked, puzzled.

Ino shrugged. “Isolated, elitist, xenophobic, whatever you want to call it.”

“As the food specialist, I’m the one tasked with examining everything.”

Sakura frowned, trying to scrounge up her little knowledge about the Fair Folk. There was a problem with their food, but what?

Her eyes went wide as she figured it out.

Consumption of anything of the Fae realm trapped the consumer there.

“How exactly does that work?” Sakura asked. “I mean, logistically.” Ino and Choji turned toward her. “If the food is brought here is it still in the Fae realm? Will it affect the consumer the same way?”

“Unfortunately, the rule is still in place,” Choji said. “There have been some unintentional trappings in the past. We’ve had to petition the Unseelie and Seelie courts to get the pact broken. It is a long, arduous legal process.”

“A hell of a lot of paperwork,” Ino said sagely.
“Found anything?” Sakura asked.

“A couple of individual tarts and a tray of boxty,” Choji said. “Thankfully they hadn’t been eaten yet. Everything on this table is clean.”

“Thank you Choji,” Sakura said, grabbing a plate and utensils. “Will you get a chance to enjoy the fair?”

“Oh undoubtedly!” Choji replied, a smile transforming his face. “Everyone participates in the-”

Ino covered his mouth with both of her hands. “No spoiling the surprise! We haven’t had new visitors in a couple of decades!”

Choji nodded, smiling apologetically at Sakura.

Sakura sighed, but quickly moved on as she began sampling the different items on the table. She was enchanted by the different types of food on the table, culinary goods from lands and cultures that Sakura had never visited. She couldn’t recognize half of the things.

She grabbed a bit of each.

“What is this?” Sakura asked of Choji.

“This is aloo gosht,” Choji said. “It’s a dish that originated in Pakistan and Northern India. I believe one of the djinn brought it…”

And so on it went as Sakura made her way down the line, asking Choji about the different dishes and receiving detailed answers about their history. By the end of it, both were grinning and Sakura’s plate was piled high.

“Thank you,” Sakura said, squeezing his hand.

“No problem,” Choji replied, looking away shyly.

Sakura followed Ino as they made their way to one of the picnic tables, taking a seat and digging into her food. She groaned.

“Is Founder’s Day an annual thing? Can it be every day?” she asked.

Ino laughed, patting her shoulder in consolidation. “Unfortunately. This sort of work takes years in the making.”

“What do you mean?” Sakura asked.

“Well, the Council scouts out the Maiden for each year’s ceremony a couple of years in advance. They generally spend two or so years on each one.”

“And do the Maidens know they are being scouted?”

“No,” Ino replied. “It’s all very secretive. This year’s Maiden will be announced after the fireworks tonight. Then the fun really begins.”

“Sounds intense,” Sakura said mildly, more focused on her food than anything else.

“Understatement of the year,” Ino said. “I was the Maiden six years ago. I wore a wonderful gauzy dress weaved by the chief Drider in town.” At Sakura’s blank look, she continued, “More PC term
for Arachne?”

Sakura shrugged.

“Part-spider, part-human. She’s technically yokai, but you know the Greeks’ mythology depicted a Drider in that story of Arachne and Athena that just stuck as representative of the race.” Ino flapped her hand. “Anyway, fantastic spinner, she creates the dresses every year and each is unique. We hang them in the town’s museum.”

“There’s a museum?” Sakura asked eagerly. “How am I only just hearing about this now?”

“Are people generally concerned with local history? Not particularly,” a new voice said.

Sakura glanced up to see a man in a large overcoat and dark sunglasses standing by their table with a plate. He looked a bit familiar…

“Take a seat, Shino!” Ino said. “Sakura, you met Shino briefly at the party a few days ago.”

“Hi Shino,” Sakura greeted with a smile. “What was it you were saying about the museum?”

“Not many people are all that interested in local history,” Shino replied. “You grow up in it and it gets old pretty quickly.”

“Not to mention all the field trips we took there in school,” Ino groaned. “It’s basically our one historic site in town.”

Shino shook his head like he disagreed but he didn’t say anything.

“Are you enjoying the activities?” Sakura asked.

“I am,” Shino said.

“Don’t you need to get prepared for the fire show?” Ino asked. “It’s coming up pretty soon.”

Shino snorted. “Unlike the others, my supplies are always with me.”

Sakura looked at him, puzzled.

Shino held out a hand to her and something crawled along it, flashing.

Sakura gasped.

It appeared to be some type of beetle and it glowed. It wasn’t a firefly, Sakura was sure of that, but it acted in a similar manner.

“Glowing click beetle,” Shino said, offering it to Sakura. She took it gently, cupping her hand to create a perch. “That, along with some other bioluminescent insects will be part of the entertainment tonight.” He leaned forward eagerly. “I’ve bred a few brand new species that have never been seen before. This is sure to impress.”

Ino pulled a face at Sakura but Sakura found herself smiling. “That sounds wonderful Shino,” she said sincerely, offering him back the beetle. “I look forward to seeing your part of the show.”

She felt the intensity of his gaze even through his sunglasses.

“Let me know what you think of it,” he said quietly.
Ino grabbed Sakura’s hand, squeezing slightly. “Sakura! We have to try out the Ferris wheel before the fire show! It’ll be too late after that!”

Sakura smiled apologetically at Shino, saying goodbye as Ino pulled her along through the throng of people to the side of the fair where the games and rides stood. Sakura wondered if the games here were rigged like the ones back at Coney Island, but didn’t have too much time to contemplate as Ino stopped before the Ferris wheel. It was unlike any Ferris wheel Sakura had ever seen.

For one thing, there were two wheels on top of each other, spinning concurrently upon an unseeable fulcrum.

For another thing, it was entirely powered by a pair of witches.

These witches were male (“warlocks” was the preferred term according to Ino but they had the same powers as witches. Some were starting to push for a more gender neutral term). One wore his dark hair over his eye and the other wore his long and untamed.

“Kotetsu,” said the one with a bandage across his nose.

“Izumo,” said the other.

“At your service,” they said in unison, bowing to Sakura and Ino.

Sakura heard Ino murmur something about “showoffs” but she couldn’t help but smile at their showmanship. They were extravagant and over the top but it fit the vibe of Founder’s Day perfectly.

“How does this work?” Sakura asked, looking up at the spinning carts. They were not attached to anything yet they moved in perfect tandem.

“A simple matter of levitation spells,” Kotetsu said.

“A smattering of motion spells,” Izumo said.

“And a hell of a lot of legal release forms,” Kotetsu said.

They looked at the duo expectantly.

“That last one was a joke,” Izumo prompted.

“Well, somewhat,” Kotetsu said. “Tsunade had to vet everything first.”

“It’s completely safe,” Izumo assured.

“Just don’t ask the stick-up-their-ass Uchiha or Senju and you’ll be good to go,” Kotetsu said with a wink, opening up a cart and letting people off before ushering Sakura and Ino on. “Have fun.”

“Don’t die!” Izumo said cheerfully.

“Hate to have a lawsuit on our hands.”

“Then we’d have to work with the Nara and everyone knows how hard that is.”

Sakura blinked as the door to the cart was shut and they began to move. She could, strangely enough, feel the effects of the spell around her, raising the hairs on her arms with the crackle of power.
“You get used to them,” Ino said comfortingly. “Well, you learn to ignore them,” she amended with a smile.

“So they’re part of Tsunade’s coven?” Sakura asked.

“Yes!” Ino replied. “Despite their unconventional manner, they tend to be part of her entourage when she has political dealings with places like Pompeii.”

“Where are they from?” Sakura asked. “The coven I mean.”

“Well, the coven is nomadic. I know they have a few steady locations that they stay for months at a time to get in more intensive training with the apprentices, Pompeii among them. I think they have a holding in Japan and another in Morocco. There are others but they tend to be tight-lipped about their travels. You could ask Shizune about it.”

“Why Shizune?” Sakura asked.

Ino shook her head. “That’s her story to tell.”

Sakura nodded, lapsing into silence. She stared over the side of the cart. They were at the apex of the Ferris wheel, on the top of the second wheel. The town was sprawled out beneath them, lit with twinkling lights and a warm revelry that invited Sakura in. She didn’t feel like an outsider anymore. She was a part of this. Lake Icarus was viewable from the distance, looking like an emerald jewel lit from within.

Sakura frowned. “Are there bioluminescent organisms in Lake Icarus?”

Ino shrugged. “How the hell would I know something like that? The lake’s been like that for decades at the very least. You should ask Shino that question.”

Sakura filed that piece of information away, returning her gaze to the scenery. They were above the pine trees and Sakura was glad in that moment that she did not fear heights in the least.

“It’s amazing up here,” Sakura said softly, smiling at Ino. “I’m glad I had a chance to share it with you.”

Ino flushed, glancing away, hands fidgeting.

Sakura grabbed one of her hands, leaning her head against Ino’s shoulder as the thrum of magic lulled her into a state of near unconsciousness. Beneath her half shut eyelids, the world became a meld of incredible colors and the ancient beat of magic.

“C’mon,” Ino said sometime later, voice soft as she jostled Sakura back to awareness.

Sakura’s eyes flew open and she laughed as she scrambled out of the Ferris wheel. “Didn’t mean to fall asleep on you.”

Ino shook her head, grin wide and wild. “No worries. Let’s head back to the blanket; the show is about to begin.”

Sakura stumbled after Ino, a bit surprised to find that no one had disturbed the blanket that they’d left hours ago. She had to remind herself that this was a small town and not New York.

It was fully dark out now and the stars and moon blazed brightly above.

“Just in time,” Ino said, patting Sakura’s shoulder as they took a seat.
A woman moved into the flat grassy area that the earlier fights had taken place. She wore a red and white hat with some sort of kanji inscribed upon it. Her robe was green and laid over a rather simple pairing of a white top and pants. She grinned as she placed a hand against her neck.

“Good evening ladies, gentlemen, monsters!” she announced, voice amplified.

“Magic?” Sakura asked as chuckles rippled through the large crowd.

“Magic,” Ino confirmed.

“It is time for the main event. The Konoha coven is proud to inaugurate the night with a show. But first,” she said with a flick of her wrist, “we must dim the lighting.”

Sakura watched as fog and clouds rolled in, obscuring the moon and stars from view. In but a few moments, the clear night sky was gone.

“First up are the apprentices!” Tsunade said. “Give a warm welcome to Tayuya Uzumaki, Omoi, and Matsuri!”

Three individuals stepped forward, dressed in what Sakura would consider the traditional garb of a witch. Pointed hat, robes, the whole affair. Except for the fact that the garments were snow white.

“Apprentices start out in a white robe,” Ino explained as the three witches got ready. “As they progress in their rank, they get to wear a different color. The final rank is black. Coven leaders wear something completely different as you can see with Tsunade.”

“What’s that symbol mean?”

“Fire,” Ino replied. “Tsunade’s received the title of Hokage which means Fire Shadow. There are very few witches who earn a Shadow-title and fewer still that do it while coven leader. Tsunade is extraordinary.”

Sakura nodded, distracted as the three apprentices stepped forward.

“Oh, I love this part,” Ino sighed, leaning forward eagerly.

The boy and girl, Omoi and Matsuri, took front and center, speaking an incantation. The gourd began to glow and grow, eventually getting so big that neither apprentice could hold it any longer. They dropped it but it did not fall. Instead it levitated.

Sakura watched with wide eyes and rapt attention as the gourd continued to grow until it was the size of a movie theatre screen. Sakura could now see that it depicted a large whale chasing after some type of...beast.

“Leviathan and Behemoth,” Ino whispered.

Tayuya brought a flute to her lips, blowing a few test notes.

Then, the gourd came to life.

The two creatures unpeeled themselves from the gourd, seeming to shake off their confines. Omoi controlled Behemoth as Matsuri took charge of Leviathan, guiding them in a merry chase of each other. All the while, Tayuya played, tugging upon Sakura’s heartstrings as the rest of the gourd shaped itself into different battlegrounds beneath her will. Her music perfectly matched the beasts’ movements, loud and frightening at some moments and soft and solemn at others.
The beasts seemed somehow more substantial than their two dimensional form suggested, perhaps because of the apprentices’ magic. They were equally matched, the fight only ending as Omoi and Matsuri drove the beasts to charge each other as Tayuya’s music whipped into a crescendo.

The beasts met with an explosion of fireworks as the gourd flew up into the sky, exploding into a multitude of lights.

This seemed to be the signal to the rest of the coven as witches dressed in robes of all colors stepped forward with individual gourds in hand. They threw them up into the air, making them explode with a whistle reminiscent of actual fireworks.

These fireworks created different scenes that hovered in the air for long moments. Sakura saw castles and shoguns, airships and pirates, skylines and crowds. She clapped hard and long, voice rising among the rest of the wild crowd. She’d never seen anything quite like this.

As the last of the fireworks faded away, Tsunade stepped forward once more. For a moment, Sakura could understand the reason she’d earned the title of Shadow; she hadn’t even seen the woman disappear. She held a small gourd in her hands.

“If you would oblige me by lying back on your backs,” Tsunade said, amplified voice travelling easily. Sakura and Ino flopped down on their backs. “We have one last present for you. Thank you Pompeii.”

The gourd flew up into the air, exploding with nary a sound.

Sakura gasped silently.

Above her, clearer than the stars, was a sprawling scene so large she could barely take it all on. It was Pompeii. She recognized the streets filled with cheerful people, the eclectic shops, among which was Ino’s. The mountain range was clearly defined, broken up by imposingly tall trees. Lake Icarus was depicted as well, unseen wind moving the water in soft waves.

The town was alive and captured in the best possible way.

The living image conveyed everything Sakura felt about Pompeii, the love she felt for this small, quirky town and its inhabitants.

Then, she remembered who made the gourd.

“Sai,” she said in a soft voice.

He might have been rude but if he was able to encapsulate this much love, this fondness for the town, he might not be as bad as Sakura initially thought. She wanted to thank him for sharing this with her.

Sakura wiped at the corners of her eyes as the last vestiges of Pompeii faded away. As she sat up, she caught Ino and other audience members doing the same. There was something magical, beyond the normal magic in what Tsunade had done and it seemed that others felt the same way.

“Thank you for your attention,” Tsunade said. “I will now turn this over to Mayor Namikaze for the fire show.”

Everyone applauded Tsunade fiercely as she stepped out of view.

“Hello girls,” Shizune greeted.
Ino yelped, leaping toward Sakura.

Sakura, a bit more used to Shizune’s abrupt comings and goings, just smiled and patted the spot beside her. “Hi Shizune.”

“Did you enjoy the show?” Shizune asked knowingly as she took the proffered seat.

“It was even better than last year’s,” Ino said. “I have no idea how they are going to manage to top it.”

“I’m sure they’ll think of a way,” Shizune replied with the slightest furrowing of her brows. “They always do.”

Sakura wanted to ask about Shizune’s relationship with the coven but thought better of it. After Founder’s Day, once the craziness settled to more normal levels, she would ask.

“Thank you all for joining us this evening!” Minato said, utilizing a megaphone to speak loudly. “It is time to present the fire show! First up, we have the Uchiha!”

Sakura clapped along with the rest of the crowd, eyes lingering on each Uchiha in turn. Obito was not present among them. All had their wings on display, preened and flawless as they moved to take center stage. Their feet were in talon shape and Sakura could see the murderously long claws that tipped each toe. Sakura could barely see them with the overcast sky, but she supposed that was the point.

Madara started it off by releasing a thunderous caw, chest puffed, accompanied by a fireball that flew from his mouth.

Sakura blinked, surprised. She hadn’t realized that tengu could breathe fire. Maybe it was specifically a Uchiha thing.

Izuna caught the fireball against a fan made of dark material clutched between the talons of his right foot. He balanced easily, looking elegant with his wings outstretched as he lobbed the fireball on to Shisui.

Sakura glanced askance at Shizune who caught her look. “The fans that they use are made from their feathers. They are impervious to fire.”

Sakura nodded, turning back to the show.

Izuna was the next to spit a fireball, adding it to the circle as they whirled about wildly, always catching the fire on their fans. Itachi added fire, then Shisui, and on until the circle was a mass of streaming light as the family performed their dangerous dance.

On some unspoken cue, all of the Uchiha threw their fire up into the air at the center of the circle, breathing more fire into that spot. Sakura’s eyes streamed from the brightness as a column of fire wrought the night sky.

Finally, they stopped, darting forward with outstretched wings to put out and contain the fire. Sakura watched with fascination as Itachi swallowed the lingering flames.

They turned to the crowd and bowed.

Sakura cheered, whistling and clapping her hands as the Uchiha exited the impromptu stage and beelining toward Sakura.
“What’d you think?” Shisui asked, slinging a hand over her shoulders.

“Impressed?” Sasuke said, fidgeting slightly beneath her gaze.

“Did you enjoy that Sakura? It was for you,” Madara said, grinning with spinning red eyes.

“I hope you enjoyed it Sakura,” Izuna said in a quiet voice.

Their voices were a loud clamor, competing with each other to be heard.

“Hush!” Shizune said, eyes flashing green. “There are other contestants!”

The Uchiha fell silent, chastised.

“Yes you all did very well,” Sakura said quietly. She looked at Itachi. “I had no idea you could eat fire.”

“Not every Uchiha can,” Itachi replied. “It’s a gift for select few.”

Sakura smiled in a puzzled sort of way, getting the feeling that he was trying to win some sort of competition but she wasn’t sure of the rules or the prizes. Instead she shrugged, allowing them space on the blanket as they watched the other contestants. Sakura was eternally grateful that Shizune was present to keep the Uchiha in line.

They watched as different individuals and families presented their own fire shows.

“And now we have Shino representing the Aburame family,” Minato announced.

Shino moved to center stage, looking unassuming in comparison to all the flash shown by prior participants. He still wore his sunglasses. He stood there for several long moments before shedding his long trench coat. Beneath it he wore a tank top and loose fitting pants.

Shino stretched his arms out and Sakura’s breath caught in her throat as his skin began to glow. Like, actually glow. Lights moved around beneath his skin and a muted buzz wrnt the air as thousands of glowing lights began to appear in the treeline.

For a moment, Sakura was reminded of Christmas trees.

Then the lights, bugs Sakura realized, flew to Shino. They surrounded him, making him the eye of a bug tornado.

She watched with breathless anticipation as the bugs began to play out a story, one that Sakura had learned since arriving here.

Ino whistled. “The story of the Maiden. That’s a pretty ballsy move on his part.”

Madara grumbled something, frustrated by Sakura’s enthrallment with the story.

Sakura didn’t even notice, watching as the band of five, for the Maiden was a hero as much as the others, moved up to the volcano. The Maiden made a selfless sacrifice unto the volcano. The volcano, moved by her decision and the prayers of her people, returned her to Pompeii unscathed by the magma that surrounded her.

Shino took a bow as the Maiden embraced the heroes, settling in as the newly appointed leader of the town. When he stood, his coat was firmly in place once more.
Sakura couldn’t stop grinning as she applauded his performance.

“Our last show for the night is the Uzumaki clan!” Minato said.

Sakura could make out Naruto, Menma, Karin, and Kushina among the group of ten or so Uzumaki. Her eyebrows went up as, with a snap of their fingers, their hands became coated in green light. Naruto’s fire was a blazing white, Menma’s was black.

With the lithe ease of the foxes they truly were, the Uzumaki threw their fire into the air, somersaulting and flipping into a different place in the lineup. When they stood once more, they caught the previous person’s fire. This went on for some time, as they added in more fantastic stunts.

Kushina ended it with a slash of her hand, the fire evaporating away.

“Get ready,” Ino said in Sakura’s ear.

Sakura glanced at her, only to be bombarded by someone.

“So what’d ya think? We were the best right?” Naruto asked, embracing her.

Sakura laughed, doing her best to untangle herself from him.

“Get off her, dumbass,” Karin said, getting Menma’s assistance in pulling Naruto off of Sakura. “Sorry about him. We keep saying he’s adopted but, well, he has Minato’s looks.”

“That’s not the side of the family he gets it from,” Izuna groused, eyes bright and red.

“Quiet,” Shizune chastised, eyes fixed on the field. “It’s about to start.”

Everyone immediately fell silent and stared down at the field. Sakura was startled, knowing that the fire show was over. What were they waiting for?

Apparently they were waiting for three older people to hobble into the field.

They didn’t use magic to enhance their voices but Sakura could hear them perfectly. No one else dared to speak.

“We’ve come to a decision about the Maiden,” the sole woman of the group said. “This is not a decision made lightly.”

“We have been following this individual for three years. They are the perfect candidate,” one of the men said.

“Our Maiden this year will be Haku!” the woman said.

A murmur arose from the crowd, the overall tone one of confusion. A squawk of anger and disbelief came from Haku, only for it to be silenced quickly and efficiently by Zabuza.

“What’s wrong?” Sakura asked, looking around.

“We’ve never had a Maiden in the winning team of the competition,” Itachi said, face pale and red eyes alert. “Certainly, we’ve had men act as the Maiden but this puts us in a quandary.”

“Why?” Sakura asked.

“The competition gives us four winners,” Karin said, “four heroes. Then the Maiden is announced.
This year though…who’s going to be the fourth hero?

“Silence,” the man in the eyepatch said in a soft voice. Everyone immediately fell quiet. “This is an unusual circumstance to be sure but it is nothing we cannot handle. This year’s game of Lambs and Tigers will have higher stakes. The winner will be named the fourth hero. Everyone pack up your goods; the game will begin in thirty minutes.”

“What is Lambs and Tigers?” Sakura asked as they stood up and began folding up the blanket and throwing away their trash.

“It was supposed to be a surprise,” Ino sighed. “It’s the final game of the night. Usually, we play it so that the Maiden can have time to get ready. The winners of the contest play as the Tigers while everyone else are the Lambs. The Tigers hunt the Lambs. If they catch a Lamb then the Lamb is ‘dead’ and out of the game. The last person standing wins.”

“So some variation of tag, then?” Sakura asked.

Ino just gave her a blank look.

“Don’t worry about it,” Sakura said, grabbing the blanket and heading to Ino’s car. She placed it in the trunk. “What usually happens for the winner?”


“That’s a pretty big deal,” Sakura replied with a light grin. “What are the boundaries?”

“The witches tend to set up the boundaries,” Ino replied. “It always depends on how many people play. There are going to be a lot more this year, that’s for sure. The boundaries are always marked in red and send a buzzing sound to your ears. Trust me, you’ll know if you are about to go out of bounds.” Sakura nodded. “You go ahead and head back, I need to talk to my dad,” Ino said, looking at Inoichi.

Sakura made her way back, ambling along and stopping to talk to people she’d met.

“Congrats, Kisame!” Sakura said, moving up to the group of Kiri men. “I always knew you were a hero.”

Kisame turned to her, flushing deeply. “Hi Sakura.”

“Congratulations to all of you,” Sakura said, looking at Zabuza, Suigetsu, and Haku. “You guys really deserve it.” She looked at Suigetsu. “I’m Sakura, by the way.”

“Suigetsu,” he replied, shaking her hand. Sakura felt the chill and webbing on his hand. “Heard a lot about ya.”

Haku huffed, looking away. There was color high in his cheeks.

“What’s wrong?” Sakura asked.

“He’s just bitching about being the Maiden,” Suigetsu said, smile revealing his sharp teeth. “The moron should’ve known that using his looks all the time would land him in this situation. Karma and all.” Suigetsu nodded sagely.

“It’s an honor though,” Sakura said. “The Maiden saved everyone here!”

“I am not a maiden!” Haku said, eyes smouldering as he looked at Sakura. “I’m not a girl and I’m
not doing this again!”

“You are doing this,” Zabuza said, voice calm as he crossed his arms. He would not be swayed. “You are not the first man to be chosen for the honor. While the role is called Maiden, we all know it means True Hero. The Maiden saved the town from the volcano. Start acting like a man, not a boy.”

Haku’s lips pouted out, making him look all the more adorable.

Sakura was not moved. Now she understood what exactly was going on.

A temper tantrum.

She didn’t say anymore on the matter, knowing that Zabuza had said it all.

“But…but…” Haku was scrabbling for an excuse. “I have to wear a dress!”

“So?” Kisame asked. “Dresses aren’t necessarily for women alone.”

“Well, you’re not the one wearing it,” Haku said.

Kisame glared down at Haku. “Who’s to say I haven’t been chosen as the Maiden in the past, whelp?”

Haku blinked up at him, speechless.

Zabuza snorted, shaking his head. “Swim along, Sakura. You should get prepared for the game.” His smile, obscured as it was by his mask, was still terrifying. “I’m sure we’ll see you soon.”

“Don’t count on it,” Sakura replied cheekily, waving at them and heading back over to Shizune.

She was talking to another woman that Sakura recognized as Tsunade. Sakura didn’t know where the Uzumaki or Uchiha had gotten off to.

“Sakura!” Shizune greeted, smile strained. “This is my former mentor Tsunade.”

Sakura felt terribly scrutinized as Tsunade’s hazel eyes sized her up. Tsunade scoffed and Sakura knew she’d failed whatever test she’d been put to.

“You’re the town doctor?” Tsunade asked.

Sakura nodded, tucking her hands into the pockets of the leather jacket. “That I am. Is there something I could do for you?”

Tsunade’s lips curled, no matter how she tried to stifle it. “Shizune is much more qualified to be the head doctor of the clinic.”

“Tsunade!” Shizune snapped. Her eyes were acid green and not fading back to brown. She was really angry. “That is uncalled for!”

Sakura did not get to hear Tsunade’s reply as Councilman Danzo reentered the field. Everyone fell silent, waiting to hear what he’d say.

“The game begins. All participants go to the edge of the forest.”

Sakura looked around, realizing that none of her friends were near.
“Go,” Shizune urged when she saw Sakura’s hesitation. “I’m not participating this year.”

Sakura nodded, touching Shizune’s shoulder in support before making her way to the dark thicket of trees. Tsunade had dismissed the clouds that obscured the night sky and Sakura could see clearly with the guidance of the moon. Lanterns were suspended in the air around the clearing, filled with the green fire that was a mark of the Uzumaki clan.

Sakura looked around the surging crowd, knowing that there were more than four hundred other contestants. She had no chance of finding her friends before the start. Maybe it was for the best, after all this was basically a game of tag.

“Now we will start the game of Aadu puli aatam ,” Danzo announced. “Participants have a twenty minute head start. They will be pursued by Kisame, Zabuza, and Suigetsu. Begin.”

Sakura swallowed her concerns, moving off into the forest alongside the rest of the Lambs. She noticed some people were using their special abilities to assist in hiding themselves, invisibility spells and the like. Sakura knew she had to do something to level the playing field.

She took off at an easy trot toward the west, knowing that she’d come across the river if she kept heading in that direction. Once she was out of the way of jostling elbows and loud whispers, Sakura began to run, pumping her arms hard as she tried to put as much distance between herself and the Tigers.

Around the nineteen minute mark, Sakura slowed down to a cautious walk, moving forward as silently as she could. The branches of the trees obfuscated the light of the moon, making it difficult to keep to a path.

There were no other participants nearby but Sakura also hadn’t encountered any red light marking the boundary of the game. So she forged on, hoping that she was making the right decision.

After about thirty minutes, Sakura started to worry. She still hadn’t encountered the river which was less than a mile from where the fairgrounds were located. She was at the very least two and half miles out and still nothing. There were only fir trees and the sounds of wildlife surrounding her.

Sakura huffed, pausing and looking up at the sky. She knew she was heading west and the position of the constellations confirmed it, but the lay of the land just wasn’t matching up. Sakura looked out ahead of her and startled.

A hundred yards ahead she could make out some type of light amidst the darkness.

She started forward, heading for it, heedless of the little part of her that cautioned that this might be a trap. It didn’t seem to be any of the Tigers’ style.

She crouched in the roots of a tree, examining the green glowing light.

She giggled.

The light was emanating from fungi that grew along the roots.

True foxfire.

Sakura shook her head at her own silliness and paranoia, leaning against the cool, rough bark of the tree. She could stay here and rest, just wait to be found…

Sakura shook herself, standing up and pulling Menma’s jacket tighter around her. She inhaled the
spicy scent, allowing it to clear her head.

She was going to play this game until the very end.

Sakura shook out her legs, stretching her limbs. She looked up at the sky to get her bearings once more, deciding to head north.

Sakura took off at an easy clip, stopping only when she heard a yell fill the air. It seemed someone had been found.

As she continued on, she heard more and more shouts and exclamations though they seemed quieter, as if she were heading away from the Tigers which was a very good thing. Why did she feel like something was wrong?

Forty-five minutes passed this way before Sakura realized what was bothering her. The wildlife was utterly silent. There were no squeaks from the bats, no hoots from predatory owls, no chirping from the cicadas. Absolutely nothing.

Certainly, the abundant human presence in the forest could partially explain the silence, but there was noise of any animal movement. This part of the forest seemed…dead almost.

Sakura swallowed, deciding to head back toward the fairgrounds. She turned to the east and stopped dead.

A little ways ahead of her there was an opening among the copse of trees. That was strange in and of itself, as the trees grew thick and tall out here. It was what was in the clearing that left Sakura speechless.

There was a staircase.

It was a perfectly normal staircase, carpeted in a dark pattern.

The problem was its location.

There was nothing around the staircase, nothing that implied that there had once been a house here.

The staircase looked like it belonged in any of the houses of Pompeii. For a giddy, hysterical moment, Sakura thought that the staircase had been Photoshopped; just transposed on the wrong background.

But this was reality.

The hairs on her arms and neck stood on end, revolted by the peculiar image. Her brain just couldn’t compute what was before her.

The staircase was well-lit and Sakura noticed that no branches grew overtop of it. The moon was perfectly clear and shone down directly upon the staircase.

She was drawn to the staircase inexplicably. There was something that screamed inside of her to go near the staircase; to feel it; to stand upon it. That part of her was the same part touched by the Fogglet’s scarf, by the insatiable mystery that Pompeii offered her.

She felt her feet begin to move without permission, drawing her toward the staircase.

If she could touch it, feel it beneath her hands and feet, she would know. She would have all of the secrets of Pompeii laid out before her, she knew.
Sakura forced herself to stop, knowing that the pull of the staircase was unnatural. She’d felt this type of magical influence before, muddling everything in her head and giving her a buzzing blissful feeling of ease.

It was wrong.

Yet Sakura couldn’t force her feet to move away.

“Sakura!” a voice called.

Sakura jolted out of her trance-like state, turning to the call.

Kisame was running up to her, face pale.

“What’s wrong?” Sakura asked.

“What have you been?” he demanded. “The game’s over. You’re the winner.”

“The game’s over?” Sakura asked.

Kisame nodded, still looking haggard. “Tsunade announced it hours ago. You’re within the boundaries, you had to have heard it. You are the last person standing. You win. You’re the fourth hero. When you didn’t show up…” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Are you alright?”

“Don’t you see…?” Sakura began, whirling back to the clearing.

She blinked.

There was nothing there. The clearing was gone, filled in by trees.

Sakura rubbed her eyes, shivering. She leaned into Kisame, wrapping an arm around his waist to anchor herself.

Kisame flushed. “W-well, I’m glad you are alright. We need to get you back. The ceremony is beginning soon.”

Sakura nodded, keeping herself in contact with Kisame as he turned them toward the fairgrounds.

Her knees buckled and she nearly fell. Kisame caught her.

He frowned, looking her over with eyes full of concern. “You aren’t alright.” He swore under his breath, feeling the chill of her skin. He knelt, flush bright against his skin as he looked anywhere but at her. “I-if it’s alright with you, I-I’ll carry you.”

Sakura nodded, looping her arms around Kisame’s neck as he lifted her into his arms easily. She ducked her head against his side, willing her limbs to stop trembling.

Kisame held her with a firm, confident grip as he headed back to the fairgrounds.

Sakura looked back one more time, unable to help herself.

The staircase was back, taunting her, drawing her in.

She knew if she mentioned it that the staircase would disappear again.

So Sakura did nothing, watching the staircase until it was no longer viewable.
Chapter 15

The sun was close enough to smell as the air became supercharged with the promise of a breaking light over the horizon. Being in the valley, they had the benefit of a little extra time before sunlike broke through the gloom of another night.

Sakura couldn’t help but stare up at the sky as it began to bleed an assortment of colors. She adjusted the ceremonial breastplate and tilted her head back. It was if the sky was slashed open and all the juice of a new day was spilling out across heaven’s surface.

“You fine there, princess?” Kisame asked, pretending to be gruff even though it was impossible to hide the concern on his face.

His gills twitched when he thought she wasn’t focused or nodding off. Sakura said she was only tired, but Kisame watched her oddly. Something about the way he found her in the forest put him on edge and he hadn’t left her side since setting her down and walking her back to their group. Zabuza ribbed his friend about it, but when Kisame shook his head and said nothing else, not even to blush, Zabuza dropped his joking and let them be.

Still, Sakura could feel Zabuza check in on her from time to time as well.

When Sakura realized she hadn’t responded she let out a yawn and shook her head. “I’m about to fall over. I’m bushed.”

His smile was chilling to anyone but her when he grinned at her excuse. “Fall as much as you want once this ceremony is done, I’ll carry you back.”

“Don’t think I won’t. Now I know why so many people brought extra blankets. Ino said she wasn’t even planning on going home after this, they’re all just going to pass out on the grass under the tents.”

“It’s what the tents are for,” Zabuza explained, adjusting the ceremonial gauntlets on his wrists.

The gauntlets were polished to shine like bronze, the same as Sakura’s breastplate. Kisame got off easy with a belt and sword in a sheath. Suigetsu had to wear a helmet that made his shoulders look tiny. More than one person laughed at him for it.

Sakura looked back over to where the long gold and red colored tents decorated in a variety of vibrant patterns were pitched. Ino had saved them spots in a 17th century Ottoman inspired tent.

“When do we get to sleep?” Sakura asked, hating how tired she felt.

It was more than just a need for sleep. She felt tired in her bones. Her body had a new weight to it that made her brain fuzzy and soft. She wanted to curl up and didn’t doubt she would need to if things didn’t progress with the ceremony soon. The four of them were standing around waiting for Haku to be led out.

“After the ceremony,” Zabuza quipped.

Kisame edged closer to her and leaned over. “What’s going to happen is the first act. The elders unleash Pompeii’s memories and we have to just withstand them. It might feel overwhelming at first,
but it’s a huge honor to have to swim through the memories. Once we get to the other side we toss Haku into the Bone Well to represent how the maiden gave up herself to the heart of the land. We don’t do it at the actual volcano summit anymore.”

“It’s not the same though,” Suigetsu hummed, picking at his teeth with his pinky’s fingernail. “We used to get…reactions from Pompeii. Like…stuff would happen.”

“You’re too young to remember that,” Zabuza barked, glaring. “And location has nothing to do with it.”

“Reactions?” Sakura echoed, wanting to also ask about the memories but not wanting to sound too ignorant all at once. Kisame looked ready to explain, but Zabuza cut in first.

“Yeah, like a reaction from the land. One year it was a crazy upchuck of water, geysers everywhere and it was sweet, sweet water that filled our streams to swelling. Another year there were new animals that came out of the earth, another year there were crystals growing out of the trees. It’s rarely ever the same.”

“But always rare and always a treat,” Kisame added. “It hasn’t happened in a long time, though.”

Sakura glanced over her shoulder, seeing the procession around Haku advance. They walked slowly, the way a bride would walk down to her groom on her wedding day. There were two elders in front of Haku and two behind him, so Sakura couldn’t see his dress.

“Do you think it will react this year?” Suigetsu asked.

Zabuza snorted. “Not for Haku it won’t. You know it was a political stunt when they chose him. He needs to mature and that’s how they’re doing it. The maidens haven’t meant much in a while.”

“I want to see a reaction though,” Suigetsu huffed, looking dejected as his shoulders dropped.

Kisame slapped the younger male on the back and grinned. “Look alive kid, we gotta brace soon.”

Sakura stepped back as Haku and the elders came up and passed them by. Sakura saw that in addition to the dress that looked like it was spun from spiders dizzy with love for lace and pattern, there was a white cloth that hid Haku’s face. All the maidens wore it, because no matter how lovely or pretty they were when chosen, they were not identical to the original maiden and no one wanted to offend her memory, so the face was always covered with a white cloth.

“Here we go,” Kisame whispered, turning towards the Bone Well and taking a solid stance with his knees bent and feet buried. Sakura mimicked the action and missed how Kisame’s lips quirked at the move.

The elders left Haku and went to the four corners of the well. Each one grabbed a rope from their corner and pulled just as light crested over the cusp of the mountains and into the valley.

Sakura was hit with memories just like Kisame said she would be, and it was odd to realize how right he had been. Gone was her sense of self as the ghost of a man in armor like her’s found her in the stream of warped noise and running color. Sakura felt him enter her and then the chaos around her dulled and came into focus. She saw a scene not unlike the one depicted in the stories told.

Sakura turned and saw Kisame, but he was actually a woman with short blond hair and harsh eyes, holding her sword aloft. Zabuza was a different person as well, and Suigetsu had also transformed into one of the old heroes.
‘We have to stop it.’

‘This wasn’t supposed to happen.’

‘You said...we...it.’

Some of the voices faded in and out. There was shouting and struggling. The heroes were trying to get to the maiden, to keep her from her sacrifice. They’re all hurt, but Kisame got to Haku, or his ghost self got to the maiden. Sakura saw both realities and it was almost too much for her brain to process. It’s too much. Too much.

‘Bring her back!’

But Kisame lifted Haku and lowered her into the well. Sakura watched as the blond warrior woman threw the maiden that had been her best friend into the mouth of the volcano. Sakura felt the sacrifice of that action and it near paralyzed her. She could feel a lot of things. She felt the feelings of the blond warrior that Kisame was—how she loved the maiden and wanted to respect her best friend’s choices and decisions. Sakura also felt the heart of the warrior who’s breastplate she wore. He was suffering. His heart was so heavy and it was dragging her down. Sakura thought she would be sick from how she suffered at the thought of the maiden truly leaving their side forever. Did he love her? Maybe. But he didn’t know that at the time, so neither did Sakura.

There was fire and ash and the others were screaming. Sakura was screaming, but Kisame’s ghost trusted her friend—her best friend, and the deed was done. They’re still screaming and Sakura wanted to see what happened next, but there was something tugging her back, a limit to her that tell her she can go no further.

Not yet.

The stream of memories was over and Sakura was falling onto her hands and knees, head spinning, ears ringing as the crowd around them yelled and cheered for the heroes, all of them. Sakura wanted to spill herself on the grass, but she held it all down, too proud to show that side of her.

Suigetsu also looked sick, but stayed standing. Sakura breathed deep and pushed herself back up.

Kisame was helping Haku out of the well and the younger boy was whining about something or other. That’s not new. Sakura just wanted to sit and rest, but the elders were speaking and someone was talking back and the rest were cheering as more lights and sparklers go off.

Someone reached for her breastplate and Sakura saw one of the elders there, undressing her and relieving her of the ceremonial garb with care. Sakura thought his name was Danzo, but her memory was foggy. Everything was a little foggy. He watched her with a weary eye, likely noticing her state of unease. He didn’t comment on it, though, just took her armor and left.

“You did amazing!” Ino cheered, launching herself at Sakura. It was enough of an excuse to fall onto the grass and pretend it was all Ino’s fault. “What did you see? What did you see? You were in there so long, you looked like you saw something!”

“Of course I saw something, wasn’t that the whole point?” Sakura huffed, closing her eyes and leaning back into the grass. She breathed deep and let the breath hang in her lungs before letting it go. “What did you see?”

“Only the champions can see the memories, silly. That’s why it’s such a big deal. Ah, but most of the time the memories are a mess. Yeah, when Sasuke and Naruto were in there all they could see were
geometric shapes. Were you able to see any details?"

Sakura saw well enough, but more than that she felt the memories. Thinking back to how she felt to
watch one friend lift another to certain death was…

Sakura turned in the grass to see the others, Kisame, Zabuza, and Suigetsu stumble about looking
almost as dazed as her. They hid it better, but Sakura was searching for signs of the same distress
they were feeling. Zabuza’s eyes were the ones that caught her looking and they narrowed
dangerously. Sakura felt his glare but didn’t flinch.

He started to take a step towards her as Suigetsu sought out Kisame in excitement, but Haku called
out to his mentor and Zabuza had to stop. He glanced between Sakura and Haku, debating, and then
finally turned away from her.

For now.

“Ino, I’m tired,” Sakura whispered.

The blond leaned back and looked over her friend with a pout. “Yeah, I guess you are. That’s been a
full night for you. Founder’s Day is an ordeal even if you aren’t a champion and the winner of our
lamb game, and this was your first one.”

“You really know how to show a girl a good time,” Sakura chuckled.

Her heart was heavy and her eyes wanted to close so badly. She needed to sleep, she needed to lay
down and be fixed. Something was wild inside of her and her brain needed to sort it all through. She
suspected she was not meant for such adventures.

“Someone need a lift?”

Sakura looked up and saw Naruto, Sasuke, and Menma coming up. Naruto was hovering over her
first, followed by his best friend and then his grumpy twin. Sakura blinked as Karin shoved her way
into the ring as well.

“Sakura,” Karin purred. “You and Ino can sleep under our tent with us, it’s the prettiest and it’s also
the one where most of the rookies crash.”

“Rookies?” Sakura felt slow on the uptake, but she was sure she hadn’t heard of the rookies before.

“Ah, that’s what the younger generation is called,” Naruto chirped. “I’m a rookie and so is Sasuke
and Kiba and Shino and Ino and all the others. We’re like the babies.”

“Shut up,” Sasuke hissed. “We are not babies.”

“You’re the same age group as me, bastard,” Naruto growled back.

Karin rolled her eyes at the boys. “The kids are spoiled around here, so yeah, we have the best tent.
You coming?”

Sakura didn’t feel like moving but she laughed and said she would.

She didn’t have to move. Ino was quick to help her up and Naruto was quicker to steal her away into
his arms and run with her between him and Menma to the tents alongside Sasuke. She was so tired
she didn’t even complain.

Sakura saw which tent was theirs and knew what it was before the boys ever pointed it out. It was in
the center of the fields and protected and surrounded on all sides by other, clan tents. Rookies like Sasuke and Naruto had the option of using the community tent or staying in their family tents. Most years it was a toss up, depending on how they felt about each other, but there were a fair number of friendly faces gathered together inside.

Naruto kept her in his arms as they passed under the main flap and stepped up onto plush Persian rugs. All the shoes were left on the deck outside and bare feet abound. It smelled earthy and lovely. There were spices burning in the high parts of the tent, where the poles held the fabric up.

Down on the ground the corners were all build up with pillows and cushions and day beds and mattresses that made it less of a tent and more of a…well, Sakura didn’t know what to call it, but it didn’t feel like what she thought a tent should feel like.

“It’s lovely,” Sakura giggled, feeling light headed. There were slits in the sides of the tent for ventilation and light. Glass colored in all shades of the rainbow caught the light and bounced it all around. It was like something out of a fairytale. “I’ve never seen anything so pretty.”

“You haven’t seen much, then,” said Menma.

Menma snorted just as Sasuke dropped the flap behind them. The others were coming through behind them.

“Come on,” Naruto cheered before remembering to keep his voice down. There were already a few bodies laid down to sleep. “We have the best corner.”

Sakura heard the others behind her coming in as Naruto led her to a plot not too far and not too close to the centermost pole. There was a hammock high up between the poles that Sasuke leapt for, shiny black feathers lifting him higher before he landed. Sakura watched as his wings folded away and he settled himself into the hammock, turning so he could watch her as Naruto and his twin made a place for her between them.

“Perverts,” Karin hissed, coming up behind Menma and kicking him in the knee. The darker haired twin hissed and glared at her, teeth bared. She glared back, baring her own fangs. There was a growl deep in his throat but he backed off a bit, giving her the space he once occupied.

“No!” Naruto whined, hugging Sakura to him as he fell to the mattresses on the ground under him. “You have no right to say that. What with being a kettle calling others black—oh wait, how does that saying go now?”

“Move over,” Karin complained as she knelt down and pulled pillows up to where they intended to lay. Menma watched them wearily but didn’t leave. Instead, he pulled himself closer so that Sakura and he would almost share the same pillow, facing out in opposite directions. Naruto was to her left and Karin to her right. Ino came up later and lay down close to Sakura’s knees.

Naruto wiggled a little closer and reached for one of her hands. Sakura didn’t have the energy to push him away, and when his tails flared out and wrapped around them she really didn’t think she had the heart to either.

Naruto exhaled out and there was a rustle as orange bloomed all around her. Sakura kept her eyes open long enough to see the nine fluffed tails move free. A few fell over her waist and curled up around her stomach. They were warm like the heat from a burning log. He smelled like woodsmoke too.

Sakura reached for one without thinking much of it and settled down onto the mattress, keeping it
close to her face and inhaling. It smelled like home, even though that made no sense.

There were sounds above her and around her, hushed whispers, sharp hisses, and maybe a scuffle or two, but Sakura drifted past it all into sleep, feeling like she needed it more than she ever needed it.

Only once in the day of sleep did she wake. She heard talking and stirred slightly but didn’t open her eyes. Someone was holding onto her legs and Naruto’s tails were still around her, smelling like woodsmoke. Karin’s back kept her back safe and Menma’s stray arm had reached up over his head to settle on the pillow they shared. Some of her hair was caught between his fingers.

“I saw it,” the voice hissed.

“Shut up you little shit. She’s sleeping.” Sasuke, his voice was coming from overhead.

“She’s out, man, if she saw half as much as I did I wouldn’t be surprised she stays knocked out for days. Kisame was so ready to walk into a wall.” The voice was Suigetsu. She remembered him from earlier.

“I don’t care what Kisame was ready to walk into. You said this was important. You couldn’t tell me and Karin later? Where is Juugo?”

“I-I needed to tell you first, you know why.”

Sasuke hissed and Sakura heard the rustle of his feathers. “What did you see? You saw a memory we all know from stories. There can be nothing in them that would make it worth my time.”

“But I saw something Kisame and Zabuza didn’t, and I bet Sakura didn’t see it either, that has to mean something. I saw the crest of the volcano and I recognized it. I know where the original site is now!”

Sasuke hissed. “Any of the elders could tell you that if it wasn’t forbidden. It’s not something worth bragging about. It’s protected for a reason.”

“But I know where it is! What if we went there? There might be something worth exploring.”

Sasuke’s sound was dismissive. “I have better things to do. Take Karin or Juugo.” There was a pause and then Sasuke was speaking again. “Why are there pink flowers in your hair?”

“Dude, it was crazy. There were a bunch of trees that just started blooming cherry blossom petals for no reason. It lasted for like, twelve minutes and then the flowers were all gone. But the trees weren’t even cherry trees, they just…mutated for twelve minutes.”

“Go back to your corner Suigetsu, and keep Zabuza away from Sakura. I don’t want him sticking his nose where it doesn’t fit.”

Suigetsu chuckled and Sakura fell back asleep.

In the morning she remembered nothing of what she heard between her fits of sleep, not even the dreams of what happened when the heroes dragged the maiden from the mouth of the volcano, or what was spoken after her sacrifice. That part wasn’t supposed to be a part of the memories and it was never a part of the ceremony, but somehow the memory lived somewhere inside of her brain.

There was no time to think of such things.

“Shizune, what does this one make?” Sakura sighed, holding the door to her room open for another
patient with stomach pains to take a seat.

Shizune just chuckled. “This is worse than last year, but every day after Founder’s Day there are always a number of folks who wake up regretting their choices from the day before.”

“It was such good food,” the male fawn sighed before holding his stomach.

Sakura shook her head and then squared her shoulders. “Alright, time for my job.”
Chapter 16

Sakura awoke to the sound of shattering glass.

She bounded out of bed, messy haired and bleary eyed. She had no idea where the sound had come from. She could, however, hear the faint sounds of voices. With trepidation, Sakura pushed open her bedroom door.

Sakura was greeted with the unmuffled sound of an argument. She followed the noise, scowling as she caught sight of her sliding glass door. It was completely shattered, glass littering the floor.

She slipped into a pair of sneakers, doing her best to tiptoe around the debris as she made her way to the balcony.

Now outside, Sakura could barely make out the forms of people below. It was yet still night, the moon’s light a weak glow filtered through heavy clouds.

“What the hell is going on?” Sakura asked, incensed.

The argument ceased.

Sakura squinted, making out the Uzumaki twins and cousins gathered beneath her window.

“Ah, hi Sakura,” Naruto said, scratching at the back of his head.

“Why did you break my window?” Sakura asked, rubbing at her forehead. It was far too early in the morning to deal with this shit.

“We were...uh...just trying to wake you up,” Menma said, uncharacteristically sheepish.

Sakura had a strong feeling of who exactly broke her window.

“And you didn’t think to just call me?” Sakura said.

“We tried,” Karin said. “Multiple times.”

Sakura glanced over at her bedroom, wondering if she’d left her phone off after work the night before. She sighed.

“Well, why didn’t you try knocking? You know, before escalating to breaking my house?”

“You’ve got some sort of barrier around your apartment,” Tayuya said. “Never seen anything like it. Don’t fucking let Tsunade know about it...she’d be pissed.”

“Barrier?” Sakura asked, glancing around in confusion. “I certainly haven’t put one up.”

“What about those twinkling lights?” Karin asked. “The barrier only appeared after you put them up. Did you buy them from a dwarf? They’re the best at weaving spells into objects.”

“What?” Sakura asked with a giggle. “These Christmas lights? I bought them at Target!”

“Is that a magical market in New York?” Tayuya asked. “It sounds fucking awesome.”

Sakura laughed at the mental image. “Not quite. That still doesn’t explain the rock throwing.”
I...uh...that is we were trying to wake you up,” Menma began. “Just aiming to tap on the window.”

“Someone threw the rock too hard,” Naruto said, crossing his arms and glaring at Menma.

“Can we come up?” Karin asked. “We can help with the window.”

“ I can help with the window.” Sakura heard Tayuya saying as she turned, heading down the stairs.

Sakura hesitated on the staircase, remembering how brisk it was out on the balcony. She hurried back up the stairs and grabbed a jacket in the dark, slipping it over her shoulders.

The spicy scent and the way the jacket hung down over her fingertips told Sakura that she’d grabbed the leather jacket that Menma lent her a few weeks back.

Sakura shrugged, knowing that she needed to return the jacket but, considering the way he broke her window, she felt she’d earned the right to keep it a little longer.

She was a little pissed off.

Sakura opened her front door and the clan of Uzumakis stood before her.

“Well?” Sakura said, gesturing inward.

“You have to invite us in,” Naruto said, shuffling his feet, uncharacteristically shy.

Tayuya sniffed. “Never seen a protection spell like this. Or smelled one.”

“Come in,” Sakura said.

She eyed their bright eyes and red noses, before shaking her head and guiding them up the stairs.

“This is such a cute little home!” Karin exclaimed as Sakura let them troop into her apartment ahead of her. “Look at that kitchen! What all do you have in there?” She headed into the kitchen to explore.

“What is this thing?” Naruto asked, crouching by her mini Christmas tree. He inhaled deeply. “It looks like a pine but it isn’t a pine. It smells of plastic.” He touched the needles of the tree. “It is plastic.”

“Oh, is it a totem?” Tayuya asked. “Do you store your reservoir of power there? How does it work? It’s not alive.”

“Are you wearing my jacket?” Menma asked, face flushed and eyes wide. He sniffed, long and deep, eyes crossing.

Sakura blinked, slightly overwhelmed by the hurricane that was the Uzumaki.

“Can we…” She cleared her throat. “Can we focus please?”

All four Uzumaki stopped what they were doing and turned back to Sakura.

“Ah...right,” Naruto said. “Sorry, we got a bit carried away.”

Sakura crossed her arms, raising her eyebrows. “My window?”

“Got it,” Tayuya said with a grin. She waved her hands, eyes flashing a deep purple.

A high tinkling sound, reminiscent of the sound of bells, filled the air as the glass that littered the
ground rose up and reformed itself into a door.

Tayuya scrutinized it from all angles before giving a satisfied nod. She made a sweeping gesture and the glass affixed itself to the frame.

Sakura stepped forward, tentatively pressing her hands against the glass. It held.

“That’s amazing,” Sakura said, putting her full weight against the door. “Thank you Tayuya.”

“It was nothing,” Tayuya said, turning away so the others couldn’t see her blush.

“So what brings you guys here at…” She checked her watch. “At 3:23 in the morning?”

“We’ve been tasked to bring you to a little...outing,” Naruto said, eyes mischievous.

Sakura watched him, wary. “And what sort of ‘outing’ is this?”

“Bonfire,” Menma replied gruffly, still flustered over the fact that Sakura wore his jacket. Their scents were mixing in an absolutely exquisite sort of way. “It’s on the Aburame property.”

Sakura tried to remember who the Aburame were. “That’s...that’s Shino’s family right?”

“Yep,” Karin said, popping the syllable. “They have the best bonfires. They’re on the outskirts of town, in the forest. Pretty close to the Nara compound actually. They have a freaking waterfall on their property. A waterfall.”

“The forest,” Sakura said, unease pricking the back of her neck.

She’d been avoiding the forest since Founder’s Day. It hadn’t been hard; things were a whirlwind since Founder’s Day. The coven decided to settle in Pompeii, at least for the time being and every single one of them needed their annual checkups. It was rather exhausting, given the way Tsunade hovered and lingered but Sakura powered through.

But now…

“What’s wrong with the forest?” Tayuya asked.

“Nothing,” Sakura said, shaking off her worries. She settled her gaze on the group with a frown. “Why are we having a bonfire at fuck off o’clock?”

Menma snorted.

“Uh...witchy things?” Naruto said, not sounding so confident in his answer as he looked at Tayuya.

“My god, Naruto, for the last time, we don’t have meetings past midnight except at solstices and certain celestial events,” Tayuya said, sounding both resigned and frustrated. It was interesting mix. “We don’t stand around the woods at fuck off o’clock and hold seances and shit. We don’t have time for it!”

“Sure,” Naruto said, winking at Sakura.

“So why this time?” Sakura said, trying to keep the disagreement from escalating.

“It’s just tradition,” Karin said with a shrug. “We always have bonfires before the sun is up. Don’t think there’s a reason for it.”
“I’m not changing out of my pajamas,” Sakura said, looking down at her flannel pants decorated in snowmen and candy canes. It was garish and she loved it.

Tayuya looked her over slowly, taking in the mismatched flannel pants with the green sweater that had a kitten head protruding from it with a red hat on it. She smirked. “What is that monstrosity of a shirt? Is that a trophy from a kill you made?”

Sakura gasped, covering her chest protectively.

“Definitely not,” Naruto said, shaking his head. “Your nose just isn’t as good as ours. Kitsune noses beat witches’ any day of the week.” He tapped the side of his nose. “It’s as real as that plastic pine over there.”

“It’s a Christmas sweater!” Sakura said, getting fed up. “And that’s a Christmas tree!”

She was met with four identical blank looks.

“You know, Christmas? The biggest commercial holiday here in the states? A time for family and good cheer?” Her voice rose as they continued to stare at her without understanding. “People don’t work on Christmas Day! How do you not know what Christmas is?”

“What day is it?” Naruto asked.

“December 25th,” Sakura said, hoping that they’d let up on the joke soon.

“We work on the 25th,” Menma said, shaking his head slowly.

Sakura looked at them all, feeling a pang of pity. She stood up, sighing. “Alright, well, I’ll explain on the way.” She paused, thinking of something. “Give me a second,” she called, running into the kitchen and stuffing a few items into a satchel.

They headed outside and Sakura stared at the travesty that Naruto called a vehicle. It was a truck, ancient in build and Ford in nature. It was also an eye-searing orange. Even in the watery light of the moon, Sakura could see how obnoxiously orange it was.

“Matches my tails right?” Naruto asked, watching her reaction eagerly.

“It’s...something,” Sakura replied, patting him on the shoulder. “How are we doing this?”

“I’ll ride up front with Naruto,” Karin said, in a way that made her sound like a martyr. Which, considering that it was Naruto driving, she might well be. “You guys can ride in the bed.”

“We’ve got tons of blankets,” Tayuya said, catching Sakura’s dissatisfied shiver and interpreting it correctly.

Sakura grinned at Tayuya, nodding her thanks.

“Let’s go!” Naruto crowed, too peppy for this time of day.

Karin cuffed him in the back of the head. “Keep your voice down. Other people live here.”

Naruto nodded, jingling his keys as he hopped into his truck.

Karin sighed, climbing in on the other side.

Sakura stepped on the rear tire, boosting herself into the bed of the truck. As Tayuya said, it was
filled with blankets as well as enough supplies for s'mores to feed an army and a half dozen lawn chairs.

“Hungry much?” Sakura asked, nestling down in against the window and cocooning herself in the blankets.

“Didn’t you see the way these guys ate at the picnic?” Tayuya asked, throwing herself down beside Sakura and wrapping an arm around her shoulder. “I’m not sure if we have enough. Kitsune eat anything and everything.”

“Hey, don’t blame us for having higher metabolisms than witches! Besides, we aren’t the only race that eats so much. Suigetsu eats way more.” Karin said.

Sakura glanced up, catching sight of Karin glaring at Tayuya out of the open rear window.

Menma sighed, smirking as he caught Sakura’s gaze. He took a seat on the edge of truck bed, not holding onto anything. “Naruto can outeat anyone in Pompeii,” he said.

“Guilty as charged!” Naruto exclaimed as he cranked the car. “I could probably eat all of the s’mores tonight by myself.”

Music thrummed through Sakura as Naruto pulled out. Which reminded her…

“Hey, Karin!” Karin’s head poked out. “Can you put this in?” Sakura asked, passing her a CD.

“Sure thing, Sakura!” Karin said, grabbing the CD.

“You sure you’re alright up there?” Sakura asked, glancing over at Menma as Karin changed out the CDs. “You don’t have much support.”

Menma snorted, crossing his arms. “Kitsune,” he murmured, looking slightly offended.

Sakura raised her arms in surrender just as new music cut through the air.

I’m dreaming of a white Christmas...

Just like the ones I used to know...

Sakura closed her eyes, relaxing as she was surrounded by the voice of Bing Crosby crooning in her ears. For a moment, she felt like she was back in New York, with her family, insulated from the rest of the world, safe …

“Is this one of those Christmas things?” Tayuya asked.

Sakura opened her eyes, illusion broken. “Yeah.”

“What’s a white Christmas?” Naruto asked.

“Means that it snows on Christmas,” Sakura explained. “The ground covered in white, untouched and perfect. It’s absolutely wonderful.”

“Not everyone gets a white Christmas though,” Menma said.

“No,” Sakura said. “No they don’t. I’m pretty sure we won’t be getting one here either. I’ve been checking the weather.” She sighed wistfully. “It would be wonderful.”
They fell silent for several long moments.

Sakura shook off her melancholy with a forced smile. “So, let me tell you about Santa Claus.”

“Is he a werewolf?” Naruto asked. “That’s quite an unoriginal last name.”

Sakura grinned.

“So this ‘Santa Claus’...is he a witch?” Tayuya asked as they pulled up to Shino’s house.

It was a large sprawling estate in the middle of the forest, just as promised. The building, from what Sakura could see, was very Art Nouveau with curving windows and ornaments of insect shapes. The most common motif seemed to be bees. It was an asymmetrical building, favoring the left over the right. She couldn’t see the colors all that well but there seemed to be some bright splashes mixed in with the neutrals.

Sakura couldn’t help but smile at the eccentricity.

“No, he has to be a kitsune!” Menma said. “The illusions, the mischief it takes to stay disguised from all the children and adults in the world...he’s kitsune!”

“There are invisibility spells!” Tayuya replied. “He’s definitely a witch. That’s how he fits in each chimney.”

“Which is it Sakura?” Menma asked.

Both of them turned to stare at her.

“Well...” Sakura said, biting her lip. She didn’t want to spoil their fun.

The truck shut off, cutting off Mariah Carey’s voice. Sakura silently thanked Naruto’s timing as she hopped out of the bed of the truck.

“Let’s go!” Naruto cheered, climbing out of the truck.

Sakura looked around, taking in all the other cars parked on the property. None stood out quite like Naruto’s and all were fancier.

“Who all is here?” Sakura asked, taking twenty bags of marshmallows from Tayuya.

“Everyone,” Karin replied. “I told you these bonfires are kind of a big deal.”

Menma sniffed the air. “Seems like they’ve already started.” He grabbed a tower of chocolate bars. “Let’s go.”

Sakura trusted their senses to guide them as she followed them away from the house into the forest. Her anxiety spiked momentarily as she remembered the staircase but she felt comforted by the people surrounding her. She doubted something would happen with people around.

Right?

Soon, Sakura could hear the boisterous noise of a rowdy crowd.
Next, she smelt the acrid smoke.

And finally, she saw the bonfire.

Karin hadn’t been kidding about everyone being there.

The bonfire was massive, over ten feet wide and over twenty feet high. It didn’t even come close to topping the trees in the forest.

“How?” Sakura asked weakly. It couldn’t be a natural bonfire. It just couldn’t.

“How? All of the people who were in the fire show are here,” a voice said.

Shino stifled a yelp as she turned and found herself looking into the reflective sunglasses of Shino. She smiled which seemed to startle him.

“Thanks for allowing us to join,” Sakura said.

Shino just watched her, adjusting the collar of his trench coat. “Everyone is welcome,” he said quietly. “It’s tradition.”

“Well thanks for allowing a newcomer like me to join your tradition,” Sakura said, still grinning. She could see the flames reflected in his sunglasses, though she had no idea how he could see. “The Uzumaki brought s’mores,” Sakura said, turning to them. The Uzumaki had moved to the buffet table, dumping the s’mores supplies there. “And I brought a little something too.”

Shino nodded, walking with her to the table.

Sakura placed the marshmallows down, before rifling in her bag and pulling out a box triumphantly.

“What is that?” Shino asked, looking over her shoulder. He’d never seen anything like it.

“Candy canes,” Sakura said.

Shino glanced between the box and her pajama pants. “Seems like you enjoy wearing your food.”

Sakura flushed slightly, suddenly remembering her rather ridiculous outfit of pajamas, leather jacket, and sneakers. How unprofessional. She hoped it didn’t color the impressions of the partygoers of their doctor. She decided to let it go, knowing she couldn’t control it now.

“In any case, these are delicious, especially with s’mores,” Sakura said. She glanced at the crowd. “Unfortunately I didn’t prepare for a group this size.”

Shino shrugged. “First come, first served. Everyone knows the rules.”

Sakura nodded, mollified. “Well, here,” she said, pressing a candy cane into his hands. “Pull the plastic off and you can just lick it. Or, you can do as I am and just,” She placed a candy cane on the table and brought her fist down on top of it, “crush it up. Then you can add it to your s’more!”

“I’ll follow your lead on this one,” Shino said graciously, crushing the candy cane.

Sakura grabbed a marshmallow and one of the sticks that someone had graciously picked up in the forest. She looked at the crush of the crowd and, hesitating for only a second, took Shino’s hand in hers to pull him along behind her.

She heard some sort of buzzing sound but it was quickly overwhelmed by the noise of the people
around them.

They arrived fireside no worse for the wear and placed their marshmallows over the flames.

Shino pulled his out as it reached that perfect golden brown state.

Sakura did not.

“Aren’t you going to pull it out?” Shino asked, trying to hide his distress.

Sakura snorted. “No. I like mine charred.”

“Heathen,” Shino replied, before he could stop himself. He flushed.

Sakura, thankfully, only laughed. “You have strong opinions on marshmallows, my friend.”

“I’m sorry. Kiba does the same--” Shino began, trying to explain himself.

“I like it,” Sakura said, bumping his shoulder with an easy smile.

“...your marshmallow is on fire,” Shino muttered, hunching his shoulders.

“Perfect!” Sakura exclaimed, pulling the burnt mess out of the fire and blowing on it. “Now the trick is to pour the candy cane dust on the graham cracker, then put the chocolate, followed by the marshmallow, and topped by the other graham cracker.”

Shino followed her instructions and took a bite as she did. He chewed thoughtfully. “It tastes like mint chocolate.”

“Exactly!” Sakura exclaimed.

Shino smiled slightly at her. “It’s nice.”

“Glad you enjoyed it,” Sakura said.

“Sakura, what are you wearing?”

Sakura turned, rolling her eyes at Madara. “It’s called an ugly Christmas sweater, Madara. I was kind of woken up to come down here.”

“No, not that!” Madara said, flapping a hand. “The sweater’s adorable, though a bird would look much better.”

“Then what is it?” Sakura asked, casting Shino an apologetic glance.

He shrugged, smiling before turning to talk to other guests.

“*That!*” Madara said, gesturing to her outerwear. “Why are you still in possession of that jacket?”

“I haven’t had a chance to return it yet,” Sakura said. “Besides, I was a little upset at Menma earlier for breaking my window so I decided to keep it for the time being. He doesn’t seem to mind.”

“He wouldn’t,” Madara muttered, gaze dark.

“What brings you here tonight, Madara?” Sakura asked, folding her hands into her armpits. Her extremities were cold, even with the bonfire at her back.
Madara’s eyes flickered brightly in the light of the flames, looking like fire themselves. “Here,” he said, sweeping off his topcoat and draping it over her shoulders. He frowned slightly as his scent intermingled with Menma’s but he shook it off.

Sakura laughed, drawing it tighter around her shoulders. “Thanks,” she said. “At this rate, I’m going to be drowning in outerwear by the end of the night.”

“Not likely,” Madara said.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Sakura asked, watching him with concern. “You tengu don’t have much fat on your body. How are you staying insulated against the cold?”

Madara raised an arm, showing her the shift of feathers beneath his skin. “Besides, there’s always the other thing.”

“Oh?” Sakura asked, raising her brows.

Madara breathed in deep and released a small fireball at the bonfire. The bonfire crackled and swelled in strength with the added fire.

Madara looked at Sakura smugly. “Fire breather.”

“That you are,” Sakura said with a nod.

Madara watched her for a long moment, looking like he wanted to say something. Instead he sighed, glancing up at the sky. “I need to get back to Izuna.”

“How is he?” Sakura asked, placing a hand on his arm.

“Same as ever,” Madara said with a forced smirk. “Come by in a few days. You can give him a check-up and cheer his spirits.”

Sakura nodded, walking with Madara to the edge of the bonfire. She watched with awe as he shifted, feathers covering him. She didn’t think she’d ever get used to it. He gave her a nod before pushing off into the air, powerful wings beating and stirring up her hair.

She kept her eyes on him as he disappeared past the treetops, leaving her alone.

“My, my, Sakura,” a voice said.

“Cat got your tongue?” another said.

Sakura sighed, looking at Kotetsu and Izumo and the twin grins they were sporting. They were staring directly at her chest.

Or rather, what was on it.

“Cute,” she said, smirking at them. “Been prepping that line for a while?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Izumo said, looping an arm around her shoulder.

“You just seem to be a great muse,” Kotetsu said, wrapping his arm around her free shoulder.

“So many ideas.”

“So many things to ridicule.”
“Really, you make it too easy.”

“Great material though.”

“Ha, ha,” Sakura said, scowling at them.

“Come now Sakura, don’t think of us too harshly,” Kotetsu said.

“We’re about to give you the time of your life,” Izumo said.

“Somehow, I doubt it,” Sakura replied, amused.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about it,” Kotetsu said.

“We’re going to show you one of the best parts of the forest.”

“The forest?” Sakura said, fighting to keep her voice steady.

“The will-o’-the-wisp,” they said in unison.

Sakura swallowed back her fear as they stepped beyond the ring of the party, heading deeper into the forest. What happened a few weeks ago was a fluke. It had to be.

“Some people believe that kitsune foxfire causes it,” Izumo said.

“As if,” Kotetsu said with an eyeroll.

“Then what is it?” Sakura asked.

“Hell if we know,” they said cheerfully before beginning to whistle, terribly off-key different songs.

“I think you’re scaring them off,” Sakura said.

“Oh, feisty!” Kotetsu said, drawing her closer.

“Good to see you’ve got some bark!”

“Hush,” Sakura said. “If you want to find this will-o’-the-wisp, then you have to be quiet.”

“So you’re an expert now?” Izumo asked with a grin.

Sakura elbowed him in the side which seemed to do the trick.

They fell silent, walking in unison. Now that they were quiet, Sakura could appreciate her surroundings better. It smelled absolutely wonderful out here among the trees and fallen leaves. Their footsteps created satisfying crunches as they moved forward. Visibility was dim but Sakura could make out the tree trunks around her.

She blinked against the sudden brightness.

Then she gasped.

In front of her, maybe twenty yards away, was a golden orb bobbing in the air like a buoy on the ocean. Little motes of light surrounded it, swirling like a galaxy. It was absolutely otherworldly and gorgeous.

“There you go,” Kotetsu whispered.
“Found one on your very first hunt,” Izumo said.

“How lucky,” they said.

“Now what?” Sakura asked, glancing between them.

“Approach it,” Izumo said.

“Really?” Sakura asked, casting them a skeptical glance. She knew that they liked to pull practical jokes on others.

“It won’t hurt you,” Kotetsu said, nudging her forward.

Sakura glanced between their earnest expressions and, with a sigh, she walked forward.

She went about it tentatively, taking her time to approach the will-o’-the-wisp. It didn’t do much of anything, just bobbing in place there.

She swallowed as she came closer and saw just how bright it was. She could see why will-o’-the-wisps were used as lanterns for lost travellers.

But she wasn’t lost.

She came up beside it, hands within reaching distance.

She could hear Izumo and Kotetsu whispering furiously behind her.

Sakura reached out with a tentative, shaking hand.

“Sakura, don’t--”

She touched it.

The will-o’-the-wisp was surprisingly cool to the touch and it vibrated beneath her hand, feeling alive. It surged upward, disappearing with a flash.

Sakura swallowed, getting the feeling that something was wrong.

She turned, hoping against hope that Izumo and Kotetsu were there.

They were not.

Instead, there was something else.

Sakura fought the sickness that roiled in her stomach.

Before her was a chimney. It was tall and thin, reaching over fifteen feet into the air. It was empty and made of solid red brick. It looked like it had been ripped out of a house and dropped here in the middle of the forest.

The chimney was surrounded on all sides by large trees and it stood out like a blight; an abnormality that besmirched the purity of the forest.

Sakura caught the faintest whispering of voices as time stood still. The voices weren’t speaking English, though Sakura couldn’t make out the words. There was one thing she was sure of.

The voices weren’t human.
Sakura knew it somewhere deep in her gut.

The voices picked up in intensity as suddenly it felt like they were right up against her ears. Sakura fell backward, scrambling away from the chimney.

The voices were shouting, screaming at her about things she couldn’t comprehend.

She bit back a shout as the chimney flared to life with green fire that roared.

The voices fell silent.

Sakura felt something wet and tacky on her face. She brushed the tears away, surprised to find that her fingers came away red.

Blood.

Sakura glanced up at the chimney and felt that same unnatural pull to approach it, to touch, to throw herself on it like a pyre .

Sakura shook her head, slapping her face to try to break the hold. The slap seemed to help as she got to her feet shakily and ran away from the chimney.

Everytime she looked back, it seemed like she hadn’t moved at all.

With desperation, Sakura pulled her phone out. She had no coverage. Sakura bit back a curse, stuffing her phone away.

The phone started ringing, blaring “You’re a Mean One Mr. Grinch.”

That broke Sakura out of her terror somewhat and she laughed under her breath as she fished her phone out. “Hear that, satanic chimney? This phone’s sure got your number.”

The screen on the phone was red. It answered itself the moment she pulled it out.

The voices started up again.

Sakura scowled. “You know what? You can just fuck off!”

She slammed the off button on the side of her phone and took off running again.

This time she refused to look back.

Sakura was furious.

“Sakura! Sakura! Sakura!”

Sakura could hear the desperate cries ahead of her.

She ran forward, following the noise. She ran headfirst into the arms of Kiba.

“Sakura!” he exclaimed, looking her over. “Shit. Guys, I found her!” He fumbled with something in his hands for a moment before setting off a flare.

He helped her into a seated position on the mossy forest floor, arms still around her.

“What happened Sakura?” he asked, rubbing at the blood that marred the tear tracks on her face. “Shit, you look terrible.”
“Thanks,” she coughed, throat hurting.

Had she been screaming?

“Where have you been? It’s been hours. Izumo and Kotetsu said you were with them looking at will-o’-the-wisps and you vanished,” Kiba said, cleaning her face with gentle, callused hands.

“Not will-o’-the-wisps,” Sakura said.

He passed her his flask. “It’s water,” he assured her as he started combing hands through her hair.

She drank greedily, surprised by how parched she was. “How long?”

“It’s been at least five hours,” Kiba said, turning her around and nestling her against his chest as he combed through her hair. “Look up at the sky.”

Sakura glanced up, seeing that it was daylight once more. She looked down at her watch, swallowing when she saw the time

10:42 AM.

Six hours.

Six hours.

“We had to call the police,” Kiba said, “and the feds.”

“What?” Sakura yelped, turning to glare at him.

“You were missing!” Kiba said defensively. His resolve broke first as he sighed, rubbing her shoulders. “Look, they’re going to want to talk.”

Sakura nodded, standing up. She touched her hair, surprised to find it in an intricate braid. “Thanks Kiba,” she said, giving him a hug and passing him the flask.

People came running toward them, crashing through the trees.

Tobirama led the charge.

“I need to ask you some questions,” Tobirama said, eyes narrow as he assessed her.

“Funny you should say that,” Sakura said, stepping forward, anger crackling through her. “So do I.”
Sakura felt sore in a way she couldn’t explain. Someone pushed a mug of hot cocoa into her hands just as the sun broke another layer of clouds apart and bled red across the early morning sky. She didn’t feel the form of the mug between her fingers, but she was absently aware of the warmth spreading under her fingers. That helped. She tipped the mug back and sipped, not caring that it burned her throat. At least she could feel that.

Tobirama sat down in the chair across from her at the clinic. It had been the first place she asked for when they asked her if she needed to go home. Shizune looked Sakura over and said there was nothing externally wrong, but Sakura knew shock when she saw it in others and Shizune was no slouch. The older woman draped a warm blanket over Sakura’s too stiff shoulders and chased off all the other visitors until Sakura could get a handle on all the leftover chemicals of shock and fear flushing out of her system.

“What the hell happened out there?” Sakura asked in a stiff voice. She didn’t make eye contact. The feelings of agitation and fear were still inside of her and they weren’t leaving.

“We have our agents looking into the situation and they are currently out in the field scouting for better answers. I can tell you we have a handle on the situation and nothing else is impacting the surrounding area or other people who—“

Sakura turned the mug back and took another searing gulp before slamming it a bit too loudly down on the table next to her. She fought to make her eyes as hard and alive as she needed them to be.

“What happened to me?” she repeated.

He held up two palms, trying to placate her. “We’re working on figuring that out, but I can’t tell you anything for sure. All I can say is that it won’t happen again, we’re making sure of that.”

Sakura knew she worked and lived in a unique town with unique people. She knew Pompeii was different and she knew Pompeii was amazing in ways that turned her mind and made her off kilter. Not a week went by when she didn’t learn something new about her new home. She knew Pompeii was weird on any odd Wednesday, but this…what she went through…that wasn’t weird, it was wrong.

“You have no idea what that was or how to stop it, do you?” she asked, voice a bit softer. She slouched in her seat. Her whole body seemed to sag in defeat. She was crashing.

Tobirama reached out to touch her shoulder and she didn’t move or even react to his contact. He held his breath and then ran his fingers down her arm over the fabric of her sleeping shirt. Lightly with just the tips of his fingers, he tried to soothe her in his own Fay way.

“We’re handling the situation and you have to believe we’re on top of it. We have it under control and you’re safe now, Sakura.” He seemed desperate for her to believe him in a way he never had been before. It was rare for fay to ask for anything. They bargained and tricked their way into their own desires. Tobirama didn’t even think to try that. He just said outright, forgetting his nature for a moment. “We’ll keep you safe.”

“Sorta hard to do that when you don’t even know what you’re trying to keep her safe from, don’t you think?” a new voice murmured from the back of the room.

Tobirama snapped up, back ramrod straight and eyes hard with insight. There were few who could
get the drop on him or pass by undetected. The hardness of his eyes grew even more intense as he noticed who was sitting at the other end of the room.

“Filth,” Tobirama hissed before he could guard his words in Sakura’s presence. “What do you know to speak so boldly?” It wasn’t really a question, but more so an insult.

Kakashi inclined his head and seemed to smirk through the mask he wore over the bottom half of his face. His eyes dropped from Tobirama’s stiff form to Sakura’s and seemed to waver a moment as he took in her deflated posture.

“Oh, you know, nothing good comes from me, but at least I’m honest and don’t shovel bull shit around about being in control of matters I couldn’t possibly comprehend.”

“The leftovers of an Uchiha failure couldn’t possibly comprehend much of anything, much less the insight of his better.”

“Fay are worse than elves on these matters,” Kakashi sighed, looking straight at Sakura and grinning with his eyes. “You’re best just letting them blow all their air out at once and then ignoring it all.”

“You are not invited to such places,” Tobirama put in, standing in front of Sakura and sidestepping so that his form blocked her from Kakashi’s view. Sakura sat up a little straighter at that, not understanding the animosity.

“Wait,” she was looking around Tobirama at Kakashi. “What are you doing here? Are you hurt?”

Kakashi’s eyes were blank with confusion before widening a fraction. In the next second he was chuckling into the palm of his hand. “Ah, what a cute little one you are. Shaking and stiff with your own fear and you ask me if I need help from you? I’m a bit touched, I will admit. I know your ordeal wasn’t pleasant.”

“Don’t put on airs like you know more than you do, trash,” Tobirama took another step forward, looming closer over Kakashi. “Anyone could see her state, you make no new claims.”

Both of his fists were balled at his sides and the room seemed to quiver a bit. The floorboards seemed to groan as the moisture in the wood shifted. Tobirama’s eyes flashed with something that warned Kakashi about speaking further.

“She’ll want to hear what I have to say.”

“You’re legally not allowed to divulge such information as a stipulation of the ban on your private investigator’s license. Anything more you say will be taken as a breach of oath and I will have the authority to arrest you.” Tobirama seemed to relax a bit at that statement. “Please, give me a reason to put you in chains again.”

Kakashi finally glared and leaned back in his seat. “I’ve not said anything pertaining to an ongoing investigation and I’ve not taken a case since you’ve stripped me of that privilege, thank you.”

“Keep it that way.”

Kakashi held the older fay’s stare for another heartbeat and then looked down at Sakura, breaking away first. His eyes shimmered in a new grin and he raised a single hand. “I just wanted to see you and make sure you were okay. I see that you are better and that makes my spirit well. If you ever need a friend to talk to you can seek me out. I don’t have many friends, so I’m never busy.”

“You’re leaving.”
Tobirama took another threatening step but the back door shattered the tension and drew each person’s attention to the figure in the doorway holding a potted evergreen with lights trailing off the branches. Hashirama blinked and then held up the pot. “I think there is something wrong with this conifer.”

Tobirama rolled his eyes at his brother and turned to look back at Kakashi, only to find that seat empty. Fine. It saved him the trouble of chasing him off. There was no good to come of that man, and certainly not when it came to Sakura who needed nothing but comfort and reassurance.

“There’s nothing wrong with it, I just left it unplugged.” Sakura waved to the elder of the two brothers and held out her hands, asking for the tree back. “It’s one of my Christmas trees.”

“Ah-ha, I have heard you were the festive one spreading such traditions to the younger pups. We’ve not had an outsider bring their traditions into Pompeii in quite a while. I don’t remember the tree being a part of…of…what did you call it?”

“Christmas.”

“Ah, I have heard of it….I just don’t remember. What are these for?” He held up the end of the lights.

Sakura took the tree from the older brother and set it down in front of an outlet. Once plugged in the tree bloomed into rainbow lights that twinkled. A few small balls reflected the light and the whole tree sparkled for it. Hashirama seemed delighted at the sight, and even Tobirama seemed to relax a bit.

“What a sight.” Hashirama waved at his brother. “Look, look, do you see it?”

“I’m standing right here, of course I do.”

“The little ones said they saw one of these in your room and were trying to make their own,” Hashirama laughed. “Will you teach us how to ritually dress other trees?”

Sakura grinned in spite of herself. Some of the stress fell off her shoulders. “There’s no ritual you need to follow. You can decorate your trees however you want. Some do it with beads, some with ribbon, some with strands of popcorn, and others like to use lights. Some do all of the above. You dress your tree up in a way that pleases you, but they’re always this type of tree, the conifer type.”

Sakura pointed with her toe to the base. “On Christmas morning the presents that were laid down the night before are opened from under the tree. Some people save their presents until Christmas Eve and others put them out ahead of time.”

“I am favoring to any holiday involving trees,” Hashirama absently laughed, smiling wide and bouncing a bit. His cheeks were pink from the cold and with his huge grin he looked perfectly jolly.

“We should go to let you have some rest,” Tobirama interrupted. “Thank you for your information, but we have work we must see to. Please get some rest before doing anything else. Shizune said she would mind the clinic.”

“Promise,” Sakura lied, grinning wide. In a few hours she would be back to work. Sitting alone and resting would do nothing good for her mind.

It was the next day when she got the call from the lab.
Sakura left the front desk area to take the call in the back room more privately when she recognized the tone on the other end of the line. Passing from the front room to the back there was a flash outside the window she rolled her eyes at.

Ever since her incident in the woods there was an invisible coalition of rotating guardians who watched over her from the shadows in addition to the black birds. Naruto was the easiest to spot, as he was the worst at hiding. His favorite color was bright orange and he wore it so often!

In addition to Naruto, Menma, and many of the other younger citizens of Pompeii, both Itachi and Shisui came by to drop in and say hi because they were ‘in the neighborhood.’ Gaara had come to visit and ask about her plants in an oddly stiff, distracted way, Ino had been by with Shikamaru. While the two girls chatted Shikamaru snuck off to set traps that would trigger if anything malicious passed through the shadows of her home. (She had caught him and made him tell her before they left.) Kakuzu had come by to inquire about her business, Sasori had accidently walked into her shop after confusing it for the saw mill, and even Kisame had been caught trying to hide in her bushes, (his was the worst effort in stealth after Naruto).

Sakura walked into a back room and eyed the cluster of red backed beetles that flew unnaturally out of the way—a token from Shino. They had popped up after Kiba ran in, chasing his supposedly run away dog.

“Yes?” Sakura asked, waiting for the woman at the lab to speak up. “Are my samples ready?”

“We regret to inform you that the samples have been lost in our efforts and so an analysis can not be completed.”

Sakura paused, stuck in her thoughts before swelling in anger. “What do you mean? How could you lose them?”

“We’re terribly sorry for this and hope that this will not deter you from doing business with our lab in the future. You can-“

Sakura slammed the phone down and stormed out of the room, crossing into her examination room to shrug off her white doctor’s coat and exchange it for a nicer blazer.

She reached for the fridge at the back of the room and pulled out her own collection of samples from Lake Icarus, swabbed out of Zabuza’s gills. She packed them away in a fashionable briefcase suited for official travel and toed out of her work flats. Under her desk was a shoe box with nude pumps she stepped into, cursing their design. They were the most comfortable of all her heels, but they were still heels.

She painted her lips at her desk and checked the rest of herself, taking an extra minute to pull her hair back into a perfect coil that made her glare all the more intimidating.

Good.

“Shizune. I need to run out to the lab and pick up some samples. I might be gone for more than just a couple hours. Will you be okay seeing to the patients?”

There were only two today, a Valkyrie named Yugito Nii and a naga she had seen before. Shizune was more than agreeable and Sakura sighed in thanks, grateful for the help. If she wanted to do this she had to be fast. She took another look in the reflection of her phone before heading towards the door.

“You look ready to break up a bank board meeting,” Shizune laughed. “What’s the dress up for?”
Sakura took a moment to feel confident before replying with a smile. “It always helps to look your best when you want to get your way with people who might fuck you up. I’m not planning on doing this half assed.”

And with that Sakura slipped out the back door and found Shizune’s car in the back. Once in the driver’s seat she turned on the engine and pulled out of the familiar place she hadn’t needed to leave in the car since…well, since she arrived in Pompeii. Everything was close enough to walk to and she had never wanted to travel so far in the other woman’s car before. The only place she would need her car for would be a location outside of the town limits.

It felt odd to drive again after so long, and it felt unnatural to see so much of the town passing her by. It almost felt wrong, like leaving Pompeii would be a mistake, but Sakura knew in her heart she would be back, she wouldn’t be gone for long, and that Pompeii was where she would always return to.

“It’s okay,” she said out loud, not knowing who she was talking to. “I’ll be right back.”

Sakura drove down the winds of the road, around the bends and towards the edge of the town’s limits. She could see the farewell sigh for Pompeii on the side of the road coming up and she slowed down a bit, falling under the speed limit.

A popping roar echoed out from behind her and made her slam on the breaks, screaming. She skid a bit and stopped at the edge of the town’s limits. Looking up she saw the cause of the noise in her mirrors and turned to see Zabuza dismounting his motorcycle and dashing towards her.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Sakura gasped, stepping out of her still idling car. “You scared me!”

“Don’t leave.” He came to a halt right in front of her, close enough to touch. He reached for the frame of her car instead, boxing her in instead. “Don’t go. It’s not going to happen again, you’ll be safe here, don’t go.”

Sakura frowned, not catching on. “I have to. The lab is outside the city limits.” A second later his words made sense. “I’m coming right back.”

Zabuza took a half step back and then a whole step forward. “What?”

Sakura nodded. “I’m just going to the lab where they were testing the samples you guys gave me. They called and said they lost them so I’m going there myself to make sure they run my backup samples. I’m not leaving Pompeii.”

Zabuza seemed to deflate a bit in relief and Sakura found herself smiling in spite of her earlier fear. It was a little cute to think someone was so worried for her. He thought she was leaving Pompeii because she was scared.

“I’m coming right back.”

“I don’t believe you.” Zabuza took a step to the side and then circled around her car to yank open the passenger’s side door. “This is originally a matter we dragged you into. It would not be fair to let you solve it on your own.”

Sakura looked back at his bike, left in the middle of the road. “Shouldn’t you move that off to the side?”

“No one comes down this way, it will be fine. Don’t try to stall with me. The sooner we leave the
sooner we can make it back.” He waved over his shoulder at the road and then glared at the stretch leading out of Pompeii.

Sakura thought about fighting it, but kept her words under her tongue when she imagined how much more intimidating she would be with Zabuza following her around. It might be easier to get her way with his help. A second later she slid back into her seat and sat up behind the wheel.

She gestured with her chin to his lap. “Buckle up.”

The lab was half an hour away with the speed at which Sakura drove. The empty roads only encouraged her lead foot and Zabuza didn’t seem to mind when they passed the speed limit more than just a little. If anything, he seemed to enjoy it in spite of himself.

Sakura could tell Zabuza didn’t like being outside of Pompeii. His posture was different. His eyes were too fast and darted too often. There were more lines in his shoulders and his glare was sharper.

They parked in a reserved spot for visitors and walked into the lobby that looked like it hadn’t seen many visitors in the past year. Sakura strut forward confidently, her heels making a sharp noise on the tile, while Zabuza loomed from behind her, following her lead and taking up a defensive walk.

There was no one behind the receptionist desk, but Sakura could head someone off to the side in the break room and grinned at her luck. She passed by the front counter and headed straight to the back like it was her business. She took every step with the utmost confidence, imagining herself as someone lofty, someone important. She was there for a reason and she was important.

In the hallway there was a door on her left that was locked with a key card and coming out of a bathroom just ahead of her with a keycard in his free hand was a kid who couldn’t have been any older than 19, looking a bit shell shocked when he caught sight of her and Zabuza strutting towards him. There was frosting caked onto the corner of his lips from an earlier snack and his hair was a mess.

“You,” Sakura called out, voice lowered an octave. “Open the door now.”

She didn’t show a badge and she didn’t slow her walk, but she glared like it was her right and the boy fumbled with his card before he knew what he was doing. As soon as he swiped it and stood away he seemed to remember himself.

“W-wait, wh-who are you?”

Sakura didn’t stop as she walked through the doors ahead of both him and Zabuza. She didn’t look over her shoulder and she didn’t break pace. “Doctor Haruno.”

There was another door at the end of the first room, but this door was glass and see through just like the rest of the wall. It opened when it sensed her presence and another boy in a lab coat stood up quickly at the sound of her arrival. There was more powder around this one’s face and he hastened to wipe it off. At least his hair was too short to be a mess. Sakura heard the first lab technician scurry in after her.

Sakura walked straight over to a counter and laid her briefcase down, unclasping the locks as she looked to the second boy who seemed a little older. The kid from the hallway was looking to him for answers, but this one didn’t look away from Sakura. Good.

“You’re going to run these samples right now.”
Who are y-n-damn it, Hershel, who is this?"

The kid from before stumbled around for an answer and Sakura didn’t let him find one. Instead she came up to the first man and stopped just before breaching his personal bubble. With her heels she was nearly his height but she held her back straighter and looked down at him.

“You were the one on the phone with me earlier.” She remembered his voice.

She saw the boy’s eyes go wide with recognition. “Dr. Haruno. Th-the lab samples-I can’t do anything about it and-“

Sakura cut him off by shoving her samples in his face.

“You’ll run these and you’ll be done in less than two hours. Anything less and I’ll drag you into a lawsuit that will have you fired and stripped of any professional respect even if this lab doesn’t suffer for it.” She shook the bag when his attention started to shift off of her and leaned into his personal bubble. “You think they won’t throw a couple of kids under the bus for a mistake like this?”

“I-your samples. I’m not supposed to-“ he swallowed and then he seemed to realize something before stepping back. “I can’t cut the line.”

Sakura let him retreat, but she didn’t look away and that was almost as bad for his nerves. Something in the way he recovered himself set her mind off. “You wouldn’t have lost my samples on purpose because someone asked you to, would you? No. That would be illegal and highly unprofessional. Even when the Federal Bureau was so interested in these results as well that couldn’t possibly have happened.”

She smiled but it never reached her eyes. Her smile was a little stiff and just as sharp as her winged tip eyeliner. She extended the bag with the samples once more.

“You’re going to take these now and you’re going to run them.”

Behind her Zabuza loomed.

A few seconds passed and then the lab tech extended his hand to accept the baggie. Sakura let him take it but didn’t move as she watched him begin the process for running it. Every so often he would look up and catch her eyes like stones on him, and return to his work. Sakura stayed in the room like a statue until the process was complete, which took all of two hours.

At the end when the report was being printed Sakura put it back on the printer, not asking permission, and made a second copy for Zabuza to take back. The pair walked out, startling the older middle aged woman at the front desk with their appearance. Sakura didn’t say anything though until they were back in her car.

“I don’t recognize some of these compounds,” Sakura mused, reading over the results she did understand. “I’m sorry, they weren’t able to give us a very clear answer.”

“No, that’s fine. I have a feeling the old man will recognize some of the ones you don’t.” Zabuza took a breath that came out shuddered and then leaned over to the side and rested his head on the cold glass of the window, staring at her from the corner of his eye. He seemed to grin at her. “The old man is going to be so jealous once he hears about this,” he murmured under his breath.

Sakura wasn’t quite sure what there was to be envious about, but paid it no mind as she put the car back into drive and steered it out of the parking lot.
Somehow the drive back took half as much time and they were coasting back into Pompeii before Sakura realized. It was as if the town was pulling her back, anxious for her return. She couldn’t help but feel giddy in her heart at the sight of the welcome sign.

“I’m glad to be back,” she said out loud, not meaning to.

“That’s good. We had thought you might have had enough of us and run off.”

Sakura blinked, looking over to her side at Zabuza. “Why would you think that? I believe you…I mean, you looked scared for me when you stopped me at first, but I wouldn’t leave Pompeii.”

Zabuza shrugged as they drove past the place where he left his bike. He had explained to her back at the clinic that Kisame had gone out to pick it up and return it home for him and that they wouldn’t need to stop for it on the way back.

“All the doctors at that clinic pack up and leave like it’s a trend. Doctors don’t stay long in our town, but no one’s really cared about it that much until now.”

Sakura felt her cheeks warm at the compliment. “Thanks.”

Zabuza leaned forward, hands on the dashboard. “Really. You may think at times that Pompeii is scary, or it’s not safe, but trust us when we say we’re here for you. There are too many people looking out for you for something stupid in the forest to get to you. Nothing could touch you with so many different freaks caring for you, so don’t worry. We’ll keep you safe.”

The warm feeling in her heart bloomed. “I know.”

A minute later Sakura gasped in delight at the sight ahead of her. Zabuza snorted and leaned back in his seat.

“See? What did I tell you?”

Sakura inched along, taking in the sight of a dozen new Christmas trees sprouted up in the middle of the road down main street. Some were straight up through the sidewalk without a care for placement, others were in the middle of the road, and a few were on grassy patches off to the side. About half were decorated with lights and assorted decorations.

Sakura pulled into a parking spot not far from the clinic right outside Ino’s hair salon. The evening was dim and her breath came out in a white cloud past her lips. All around her the town seemed to sparkle anew. Sakura spun, drifting out into the empty street and not caring. Some of the trees had toys in their branches, others had jewelry and beads. One was being decorated with all the shiny things that blackbirds could find. Sakura watched as a crow pinned something dazzling to a branch before flying off. A raven added a stream of ribbon previously carried in his beak.

Sakura felt her face grow wet.

Zabuza reached out to touch her just as a couple of kids around another tree spotted her and began the sprint over. It was hard to miss Naruto’s orange and Sasuke was close behind.

“What’s wrong?” Zabuza asked, turning her towards him.

Sakura laughed and shook her head. “Nothing. I’m just glad to be home.”
Sakura examined the sample read-out with a frown, still at a loss for most of the chemical composition. The only one she recognized was chlorine. She even pulled out a few of her old textbooks but none covered most of these items.

“Is it code?” Sakura muttered, nibbling thoughtfully at her pen.

The people at the lab had been reticent about procuring the results...they could have changed the names in the computer to mess with the read-out. To go that far...something dangerous was happening at the lake.

Sakura furrowed her brows, glaring down at the innocuous sheet of paper.

“Should I come back another time?” someone asked in an amused tone.

Sakura glanced up, blinking at the expanse of vivid green before her. Then her eyes focused in on the speaker. “Wasn’t your appointment at 9 this morning?”

Kakashi shrugged.

“It’s 2 in the afternoon,” Sakura said, unimpressed.

“Kakashi! How could you?” the man in green exclaimed, striking a dynamic pose. “Could it be...you were... acting cool?”

Sakura couldn’t confirm but she could swear that Kakashi sighed.

“This is Gai,” Kakashi said reluctantly. “He decided to tag along...insisted on it really.”

“I just had to make sure that a cool guy like you would actually get a physical,” Gai argued before fixing his gaze on Sakura. His resulting smile was blinding. “Dr. Haruno!” He grabbed her hand and shook it enthusiastically. “I’ve heard so much about you! You’ve done so much for the town in your time here! Rest assured Lee and I will be making an appointment soon. If we don’t I’ll do 100 laps around downtown.” His eyes blazed. “No, 500!”

Sakura smiled hesitantly at Gai. “I’m sure that won’t be necessary. You can schedule an appointment after I finish Kakashi’s checkup.”

Kakashi slouched his shoulders, bumping into Gai purposefully. “Go take a seat. I’ll be out in a bit.”

Gai shook his head, grinning. “I’ve been inspired. I’m going to run 200 laps before you finish or I’ll have to run a thousand!”

Kakashi nodded amiably and they watched as Gai bounded out through the doors.
Sakura shook her head slightly, smiling to herself. Gai wasn’t exactly the sort of person she’d pictured Kakashi hanging out with. Maybe she’d misjudged him…

“I haven’t got all day,” Kakashi glanced around the empty clinic and smirked, “even if you do.”

...Or maybe not.

Sakura shared a commiserating look with Shizune before leading Kakashi into one of the backrooms. She glanced over the pitifully thin folder on him. It only gave his first name and nothing else.

“Last name?” Sakura asked.

“Why do you need to know?” Kakashi asked, crossing his arms.

“For the clinic’s records,” Sakura replied evenly.

“Are they confidential?” Kakashi pressed.

“Well yes—”

“And you’ll burn them once you leave Pompeii?”

“I’m not leaving Pompeii,” Sakura said with a frown. “I don’t understand why you keep trying to convince me to do so.”

“You have lasted longer than I expected,” he said.

“Thanks for the compliment,” Sakura said drily, doing her best to keep professional. There was something about this particular man that just got under her skin and festered. “In any case, I cannot burn your files but you can have them removed at any time you choose to discontinue services here.”

“...Hatake,” Kakashi said gruffly. “As close to a family name as I’ve got.”

Sakura nodded, writing it down. “Age?”

Kakashi grimaced. “Never really celebrated my creation.”

Sakura paused at the word, surprised he hadn’t used “birth” but forged on, “Estimates?”

“Couple hundred years....maybe 800? That sounds right,” Kakashi said. “Give or take a few decades.”

“Let’s get your weight now,” Sakura said, stepping over to the new reinforced scale. It was utilized by zoologists to weigh animals as heavy as elephants without any issues. Not that it would really help in Kakuzu’s case, but it did help with other clients.

Kakashi stepped onto the scale.

Nothing happened.

Sakura frowned, fiddling with the slide. Was it broken? She stepped up beside him and the weight increased. She stepped back off.

“Huh,” she murmured.

Kakashi didn’t say a word.
“Try this scale,” Sakura said, guiding him to one that the average human would use.

He stepped on and there was the slightest increase in weight.

“Six pounds,” she said under her breath, sizing Kakashi up. He was rather tall and had a muscular if lanky frame. “How?”

Kakashi shrugged and Sakura saw his ears turn red.

Sakura dropped the matter, taking him over to have his height checked.

“I need to check your eyes,” Sakura said, glancing up from her paperwork and settling in on the eyepatch. “...Eye.”

“I have two,” Kakashi said, amusement curling his lips beneath the mask.

“Alright then,” Sakura said, choosing not to feel embarrassed. “I need to check your eyes.”

He didn’t move.

“Kakashi,” she began, feeling exasperation well in her chest. He was so evasive in his answers. She did feel a pang of empathy for how suspicious he acted. Something had to have made him this way. This level of wariness just didn’t come about naturally. “You know-”

She stopped talking as Kakashi moved his eyepatch away, revealing an eye of a different color.

A Sharingan eye.

Sakura blinked as the tomoe in his red eye spun around lazily.

“Ta da,” Kakashi said, voice monotone.

Sakura swallowed back the questions that bubbled up in her throat, knowing better than to be intrusive here. He’d already shared more than he cared to and she could respect that. She handed him a piece of paper to put over each eye in turn.

“Read the sixth line,” Sakura said, pointing to the far wall where a list of random letters and numbers hung.

She recorded his responses, noting that his Sharingan eye was much keener than his grey one.

“Alright Kakashi, all that’s left is to check your mouth and listen to your heart and lungs,” Sakura said, smiling up at the man.

“Don’t have those internal organs, not in the way that most people do,” Kakashi said, eyes downcast.

Sakura just shrugged. She was no longer fazed by the denizens of Pompeii and their odd internal structures. Though she did at times wonder how they managed to function. Magic tended to be the most common answer.

“Do you have a mouth?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Are you willing to remove the mask?”
He shook his head.

“Well then, that wraps up your physical. Everything seems to be in order. Are you up to date on your shots?”

“Don’t need them,” Kakashi said. “Lack of an internal system and all. Unless you’ve got a shot for agaricus bisporus, there’s nothing else I need.”

“Mushrooms? But why-?”

“Have you noticed the crop this year?” he asked, interrupting her train of thought.

Sakura blinked at the non sequitur. “Sorry?”

“The crop,” Kakashi said, gesticulating for emphasis. “It’s rather shoddy this year.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Sakura said, still unsure at the subject change.

“Spells an interesting end to the year,” Kakashi muttered. “The younglings are already clammering about the lack of variety in fermentation this year.”

“Fermentation?”

Kakashi rolled his one visible eye. “A portion of the crop goes to brewery of beer. A waste in my mind but the younglings of the town are certainly fond of the tradition. I’m surprised they haven’t roped you into it yet.”

Sakura shrugged. “Must have slipped their minds.”

Kakashi hummed, seemingly finished with his cryptic speech.

“Let’s go find out if your friend managed to run 100 laps in the time it took us back here,” Sakura said.

Gai had, in fact, completed 173 laps in the time it took them to complete the physical. Sakura eyed him, impressed that he wasn’t out of breath or even sweating. She could already tell that his physical was going to go well.

“Put it on the Uchiha tab,” Kakashi said, sauntering out the door without so much as a goodbye.

“I’ll join you after I set up an appointment!” Gai called after Kakashi. He moved to the counter. “Put it on my account,” he said. Sakura was taken aback by his serious expression. “I brought him here after all. My account should be listed with my records.”

Sakura hesitated.

“It won’t do to have him indebted to the Uchiha,” Gai said. “I have it covered.”

“It’s fine Sakura,” Shizune said, dark eyes sad but knowing. “Gai knows what he’s doing.”

Sakura capitulated, ringing it up on Gai’s account.

“Thank you,” Gai said, voice warm. “I’ll be by with Lee in a couple of days!”
“So Kakashi mentioned something interesting,” Sakura said, glancing over at Shizune through lowered lashes.

“I’m sure he said many an interesting thing,” Shizune said drily.

“He said something about everyone fermenting things around this time of year,” Sakura said.

“A tradition started and propitiated by the Akimichi,” Shizune sighed. “They tend to bring out the new brews at the winter solstice event which will be hosted by the Uzumaki clan.”

“Really?” Sakura asked. “Isn’t that soon? Tomorrow?”

“Today actually,” Shizune said with warm amusement. “It begins as soon as the sun begins to set.”

Sakura whistled. “That’s pretty early isn’t it?”

Shizune hummed her agreement. “While the actual solstice will be occurring past 2 in the morning, we actually don’t stay that long. Just until it gets fully dark.”

“Thank goodness for that,” Sakura said. “I’d been worried that all these celebrations would turn me into a night owl!”

“Not a chance,” Shizune said with a gentle smile. “The mistress of the ceremony, Mito, will have to stay until 2:44 AM but that part is much less glamorous. It’s her job as our official Keeper.”

“Keeper?” Sakura asked, putting files into the cabinet and locking it.

“So you’re going?” Shizune asked, eyes glittering with interest.

“Definitely,” Sakura replied. “We’ve one more appointment today but I can handle it.”

Shizune bit her lip, visibly wavering.

“Go,” Sakura said, making a shooing motion. “I’m sure you’re bringing some of your world-famous desserts to the event.”

“Of course,” Shizune replied.

“Make sure you save me a slice of apple pie,” Sakura said.

“I’m surprised you’d even feel the need to ask!” Shizune exclaimed, bustling around in a whirlwind of energy to gather her things. “I’ll make sure I save half the pie for you.”

Sakura laughed. “You’re the best Shizune!”

“Don’t forget it,” she said, bussing a kiss across Sakura’s cheek and exiting the building, the scents of cinnamon and lavender left in her wake.

Sakura’s smile faded as she contemplated the sample read-out once more. What was she going to do with it?

“Am I...am I here at a bad time?”

Sakura glanced up, smiling at the newcomer.

Yagura looked surprisingly tentative as he looked around the empty clinic.
Sakura glanced down at her watch, a bit surprised at how quickly time had passed. “Right on time,” she said, glad for his punctuality. “Thanks for coming by.”

“Of course,” Yagura said, stepping over to her desk and taking a seat across from her. “I am incredibly grateful that you went out of your way to get the results of those lake samples. Zabuza informed me of what you had to do. I only wish I’d been there to see you in action.”

Sakura laughed, feeling her face flush. “It really wasn’t that big a deal. Just wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

Yagura nodded and, as he realized he’d been staring, quickly looked away. “In any case, you have my thanks.”

“I’m not sure if you should be doing it out quite yet,” Sakura said, offering him the sheet of paper mournfully. “The only thing I even remotely recognize on this list is chlorine. I’ve been toying with idea of it being written in code but…” She trailed off, taking in Yagura’s tensed shoulders and dark gaze. “Yagura?”

He blinked, looking up at her. “I’m not a scientist by any means, but I’ve been around for a few millenia. A few of these I recognize...but it can’t be.”

“Why?” Sakura demanded, needing answers.

Yagura pointed to the first four chemicals on the list, the ones found in highest concentration in the samples. “These are by-products of a very specific supernatural being. He is a skin shedder. He experimented and refined his technique until he was able to take over the bodies of others. The path to his perfection was paved in failed experiments and pain.”

“So why can’t this be him?” Sakura asked, intrigued.

“He’s dead,” Yagura said, voice flat but resolute.

“Are you sure?” Sakura said. “What are the chances of someone else creating this same technique?”

“Slim to none,” Yagura replied. He stood abruptly. “I...in light of this new information, there’s some people I need to speak with immediately.” He moved hastily toward the door.

“Yagura,” Sakura said, standing up from her desk.

He paused. “Yes?”

“Who was... is this person?”

“Orochimaru.”

Sakura stepped onto the Uzumaki grounds, allowing the sounds of revelry to guide her. Large lanterns lit with golden fire that she recognized as kitsune foxfire lined the paths that wound between sand gardens and incredibly tall trees. It was a tranquil place and it rather surprised Sakura considering the rambunctiousness that seemed a defining trait of every Uzumaki she’d met thus far.

“Sakura!”

Sakura glanced up, grinning as Kushina ran forward to greet her. “It is wonderful to see you again
Kushina,” Sakura said, embracing her. “Thank you for having me over tonight.”

“Of course,” Kushina replied, tucking Sakura’s hand into the crook of her arm. “I’m glad you were able to come. The boys were a bit concerned you wouldn’t be coming.” She rolled her eyes, affection clear. “They are worrywarts, the lot of them.”

Sakura muffled a laugh in her free hand. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.” She glanced around at the twinkling lanterns and smiled wistfully. “It seems very similar to Christmas.”

“These traditions existed long before Christmas,” a voice admonished.

Sakura turned, nodding acknowledgement in Tsunade’s direction. “I was just surprised the celebrations occur so closely together,” Sakura said.

“Many cultures celebrate winter solstice under different names: Saturnalia, Sol Invictus, Lohri, Yaldâ, and Mödraniht to name a few. Christmas was set to December 25th as a result of these universal celebrations,” Tsunade said.

Sakura nodded. “Makes sense. In the longest nights of the year, it’s good to celebrate as a reminder of the spring to come.”

“Well put!” Kushina said, patting Sakura’s hand.

“I’m just surprised that you know what Christmas is,” Sakura said, looking at Tsunade. “Most people here haven’t heard of it.”

“Most people here never leave the boundaries of Pompeii,” Tsunade said. “Our coven travels nomadically and we come across many cultures. We’ve even lived among humans.”

“Then how did Tayuya not-”

“She’s only recently joined the coven,” Tsunade interrupted.

“Come along Sakura,” Kushina said, steering her away from Tsunade. “She may be the granddaughter of the Matriarch, but she can be a bit trying at times.”

“She’s the granddaughter of Hashirama?” Sakura asked. “He looks so young.”

Kushina giggled. “Part of being the type of supernatural being he is, I suppose. Eternal youth is just an attribute of the Fay.”

“Good to know,” Sakura said faintly.

“Kitsune are no slackers either,” Kushina said with a wink. “I’ve got to go get ready for the big event. Make sure you get a good seat!”

“I will,” Sakura promised.

Kushina hugged her before heading off into the house. Sakura looked around, grinning as she found the buffet table.

“Did you manage to fight everyone off to save me some pie?” Sakura asked, sidling up beside Shizune.

Shizune jumped slightly, turning to Sakura. “I did,” she said with a wide smile. She ducked, rustling under the table for a moment. “In fact, I managed to save a whole pie just for you. I was a little
concerned about the appetites here.”

“You are a godsend,” Sakura replied, taking the pie from Shizune’s hands. “I was told by Kushina that I needed to get a good seat.”

Shizune nodded, passing Sakura a fork. “You came just in time. The ceremony is about to start. You can go sit on my blanket, I’ll be over shortly.”

Sakura looked over, seeing the blanket laid out over the hill. It overlooked a natural valley that was poorly lit.

“Bring a fork with you,” Sakura said, heading over to the red picnic blanket Shizune set out. “I’m going to need some help with this pie.”

“I can help with that.”

Sakura looked up from her seated position. “Kakuzu! It’s good to see you.” She patted the spot next to her. Kakuzu didn’t hesitate to take the seat next to her, pushing his mask down over his mouth.

“Let me grab you a fork,” Sakura said, moving to stand.

“No need,” Kakuzu said, a tendril of thread emerging from his back. With ease, it cut a perfect slice out of the apple pie. Kakuzu took it into his hands, smiling bashfully at Sakura’s enthralled expression. “They have their uses.”

“Indeed they do,” Sakura replied, blinking as the tentacle disappeared once more. “How have you been?”

“Well,” Kakuzu said with a shrug. “Trying to keep the companies I invest in from falling to shambles.”

“Hidan being a handful again?” Sakura asked knowingly.

Kakuzu groaned. “I’d no idea a single individual could be responsible for so much wanton destruction.”

Sakura patted his knee, chuckling. “Hidan is quite...enthusiastic in his pursuit of chaos.”

“I have been looking forward to this celebration for a long time now,” Kakuzu said, eyes glinting with interest. “It’s my favorite.”

“Really?” Sakura asked, startled. “What exactly is this celebration tonight? I know it’s about the winter equinox, but aside from that…”

“You didn’t celebrate the equinox before coming to Pompeii?” Kakuzu asked.

“We celebrated Christmas which is a few days from now,” Sakura replied.

“Well, tonight is the longest night of the year and marks the beginning of winter. The Keeper will seal away the energy of the forest until it’s time for the spring equinox.”

“The energy of the forest?” Sakura asked.

Kakuzu frowned, obviously searching for words. “Well...Pompeii is a town seeped in magic and that magic has spread into the forest. It has affected the trees in such a way that they do not lose leaves during winter. The Keeper seals that energy away to restore balance and allow the forest to grow healthily.”
“Makes sense,” Sakura said, looking over at Shizune.

She was locked in conversation with Tsunade and it seemed rather intense. She made eye contact with Sakura and shrugged apologetically before following Tsunade.

Sakura sighed, feeling a bit bad that she’d stolen Shizune’s blanket and Shizune wouldn’t even get to enjoy it.

“It’s about to start!” Kakuzu said, excitement barely bridled.

Sakura looked down into the valley, watching as floating orbs of golden light bobbed forward. Several paces behind the orbs came individuals of the Uzumaki clan, each behind an orb of their own. At the lead and in the center was Mito, her hair pulled up and away from her face in an elegant bun. To her right stood Kushina, holding the weight of future leadership admirably across her shoulders.

Sakura blinked, squinting at their hands. Were those... knitting needles?

“Here comes the best part,” Kakuzu said, leaning forward.

Mito raised her arms into the air, demanding silence. Then, she began to knit.

There was no yarn on the tips of her knitting needles. No, she knitted the air.

Sakura watched, entranced, as all the Uzumaki joined in. Dark fabric, the color of the nighttime sky, flowed from the tips of the knitting needles. Suddenly, the silence was rent in two as a pure melody filled the air. Sakura couldn’t quite describe it. The song was high-pitched and ancient, sung in a tongue long dead and forgotten. It wasn’t human. It didn’t seem to even be earthly. It emanated from the golden orbs.

Sakura did not know how much time passed as they sat there, listening to the song filled with words she couldn’t understand. She felt the emotions though: loneliness, desolation, emptiness, numbness.

She blinked suddenly heavy eyes and swipe away the hot tears that streaked her face.

Sakura glanced up, unable to contain a gasp of astonishment. The fabric, if it could even be called that, was stretching high above them, pitch black in color. With trepidation, Sakura leaned closer to Kakuzu as the very ends of the fabric touched the ground all the way around the celebrants.

The music stopped as the orbs’ light disappeared, leaving them in pitch darkness.

Sakura had never experienced a darkness like this, so all-consuming and void of light. She wasn’t afraid though. She felt comforted by the fact that she was there with others, even if she couldn’t see them.

The fabric over them began to shine gradually. Sakura blinked as the fabric slowly began to glitter with small specks of gold. It was the galaxy, splayed out and swirling lazily above their heads. She looked up at Kakuzu, giving him a slight hug when she saw the wetness in his eyes.

The orbs started up their song again, only this time it was different. It conveyed a feeling of of warmth, of friendship, of love, of family.

Mito raised an empty orb in her hands, her strong voice joining in the song. The fabric stretched out over their heads, making its way to the open orb. Sakura watched as it entered the orb, the dark color spinning with glimmering lights.
The song ended and the golden orbs retreated to their owners, fading into their skin.

Sakura didn’t find herself feeling too bereft as she looked around at her friends as conversations began once more.

“You alright?” Kakuzu asked, squeezing her shoulder.

Sakura’s smile was a slow but beautiful thing, just like the sunrise. “Best tradition ever!”
Sakura inhaled in her sleep and the air in her lungs was cold and sharp enough to rouse her. Groaning, she shifted and uncrossed her legs, sending the blanket onto the floor in a heap that left her mostly exposed. She reached out for her phone but couldn’t feel the end table. One eye open was enough to show her why. She had fallen asleep on the couch again and hadn’t made it to bed. The novel slid off her chest next and she winced when she heard it’s heavy spine hit the floor.

The air in her apartment was still crisp enough to take notice of after a minute of disorganization. Sakura picked up the blanket off the floor and stood, heading towards the door to the outside. It was left partly open, something she wasn’t responsible for. The early morning was gray and heavy. Sleep kept her vision blurry, but after rubbing her palm into her eyes she saw that it wasn’t her. The world was white and muted in detail thanks to the blanket of snow over everything.

Sakura gasped audible, pulling her door open and stepping out onto the porch in her socks, not caring how quickly they became wet. The world was awash in glittering snow, flirting with the first early beams of sunlight from a winter’s hold. Christmas came and it was white.

“Do you like it?”

Sakura turned, surprised to see Pein sitting on her railing, dressed as ruggedly as she was used to seeing him. The cold didn’t seem to bother him even though it was starting to make her shiver. Another glance over told her that the snow wasn’t even touching his form. It drifted lazily down on either side of him, but never dared make contact with the old god of skies and storms.

“You did this?” Sakura asked, stepping closer. “I thought you needed a sacrifice.”

“Snow was already in the works, and this is the natural order of things. I may have advanced it’s fall to ensure your ‘Christ Mass’ was as white as all those songs I keep hearing from your office…” he let the words trail off as Sakura’s face reddened. He seemed to enjoy her reaction since he chuckled and shrugged on with his words. “But no, I did not need a sacrifice to suit my half hearted whims. Do you like it?”

“It’s magical,” Sakura sighed, nearly tasting her own tears as she looked up into the sky and saw beautiful snow that seemed plucked right out of her sugarplum dreams. It was perfect and it made her nostalgic in the oddest way. She felt young and giddy in the snow. She felt like a girl that danced to nutcracker themes with reckless abandonment. Surly this was the work of a storm god.

Her eyes drifted back to Pein who was watching her intently and she smiled. “I love it. How do I thank you?”

“I do nothing for your thanks, only your happiness,” he answered after a moment in a voice softer than what she was used to from him. He lightly touched the part of his punk leather jacket that covered where his heart would beat. “That’s enough for me.”

“A god starving for prayers asks for nothing in return for his own kindness?” Sakura asks, smiling out of the corner of her lips, still giddy in the early morning.
“Will you pray for me then?” he asks, raising a single brow.

Sakura lifts her shoulders to shrug as much as to bring the ends of her blanket closer. “How should I pray?”

He swallows, watching her lips with storm colored eyes that seem to spin with a new sheen of color to them. Sakura watches as he licks the curves of his lips and then lifts his eyes back up to hers. She doesn’t waver but he seems to.

There is no weakness to Pein, but in that moment of hush between her asking and his answering, Sakura feels like there is a thinness to his control over himself. He’s a figure of great power, an agent of unimagined potential for destruction, and he’s thin enough to see through in this moment. It’s humbling and disorienting in the same instance.

“I am a jealous god,” he admits in a voice like the echoing roll of thunder from not so far away. It’s low and pooling in her belly. “I would not deny a kiss in prayer.”

“What about in thanks?” She draws the blanket closer to herself.

“I’ve been known to make more with less.” There is a glimmer in his eyes before he chuckles. “I think I might even be god enough to pull down heaven for such a thing. Kings burned pyres of gold and blood for simple rain, but I was always quick to the beggar risking his last meal, the farmer slaughtering his last living livestock, the window burning her husband’s memory…what use have I for the wealth of man when the immortal feelings of longing are so much more grand?”

“I don’t want anything in return from you, Pein.” Sakura says this while taking another step closer to where he is perched on the edge of her railing. He doesn’t shift for her approach, but she sees him watch her cautiously. “I’m not going to worship you, but it is Christmas.”

He doesn’t say anything as she reaches up with one hand and turns his face to the side with her thumb guiding his jaw down. She kisses the corner of his face, cold lips on tingling skin. Her kiss is a butterfly that perches on flesh, and then is gone just as quickly as it came. Sakura steps back, off her tippy toes and smiles.

“Merry Christmas, Pein.”

He watches her with eyes wide and unguarded before a heartbeat passes and the world bleeds in a rainbow of colors as an aurora borealis spills across the sky in shifting ribbons of multi colored lights.

Sakura turns to watch it spill free overhead, making the snowfall glimmer with colored light. When she turns back to thank Pein he is gone. Her lips tingle, no longer cold.

Sakura plays with a handful of snow, watching it sparkle between her fingers when she turns her wrist. It was still s wonderful to look at days later. It was hard not to feel like a giddy child when she saw snow. The last few years the snow in the city had been pitiful and dirty. When she was younger the snow seemed so much more dazzling.

Being the weekend there was no way she wasn’t spending her free time outdoors, but the
reservations about going into the woods still remained after her last few adventures. Kisame and Zabuza had shown up to save her from such a dilemma.

Icarus had frozen over and it was perfect for skating on, but by invite only. The champions of the last Founders Day had very strict regulations on who they allowed on or in their lake ever since ‘funny stuff’ started getting into their water. Of course Sakura was allowed out there with them, but Sakura was surprised to see Itachi and one other individual bending over to lace up his skates. Sasuke straightened and saw her approach behind the towering Mizu men.

“Haku is fond of few individuals,” Zabuza began to explain. “But he seems to tolerate the youngest Uchiha brat well enough whenever Suigetsu drags him out.” The way he sighed reminded Sakura of a dad with a spoiled child that didn’t know what to do with it. Sakura didn’t doubt that Zabuza’s actual situation was only a little different.

“Are they both from the same generation?” Sakura asked, thinking back to the tent and the conversations shared there.

They had told her something along the lines of Ino, Naruto, Sasuke and that group all being the babies of Pompeii or the youngest generation. When she thought about it, she didn’t see many children if any at all when she was running errands in her new town. How did they measure age when some species lived centuries and others died over before a few dozen decades were over like the Green Men?

“Haku is a little older and almost not a part of that category, but yeah,” Zabuza sighed, nodding to where Haku sat on a bench strapping on skates. “Don’t mention it to him though, he’s as sensitive as they come about it.”

Sakura nodded, looking down at the skates she was borrowing and then back up at Zabuza. Kisame had walked on ahead to shout at Suigetsu that was trying to go across the ice barefoot and it was just her and the gray skinned man. If she asked him something here, the others likely wouldn’t be able to hear as well.

“Those readings…”Sakura started, voice hushed. Zabuza looked to her, expression sobering. “Yahura said he recognized some of the components as belonging to an Orochimaru. What can you tell me about him?”

Zabuza flinched at the sound of the name, but didn’t react any more than that. “I’m surprised he told you that much. He likes to keep his business in the family. The fact that he told you that much must mean he trusts you at least.”

“Is it that big a deal that you would have to keep this from the authorities?”

Zabuza shrugged. “We’re all a little trigger happy when it comes to an opportunity to sink our teeth in that abomination’s hide.”

“I get that you don’t like him much. You gonna share with me the reason for that or do I get to guess like I did with the forest abductions?”

Her voice is smooth with the question, but there’s a skip in her chest as her heart falls out of pace in a thrill of shock that takes her a moment to get over.

She never told anyone, not even Ino, about the dreams that came after the first abduction. They were dreams that only grew more intense with the second brush against the forest magic she couldn’t name or comprehend. She saw herself being swallowed, being pulled, dragged, sinking deep into
something she couldn’t fight against. It was terrifying how little control she felt over herself. Something pulled her towards its maw and there was laughter and the world was building up on top of her, she was being buried alive and then something began to eat her.

Then she woke up.

She thought she hid her true feelings well, but not well enough for the way Zabuza looks down at her, brows furrowed, posture turned in towards her, like he’s about to make a cage our of his arms around her. “You’re safe from him. You’re safe here. We’re not letting anything happen to you that you wouldn’t want.”

Sakura forces a laugh. “I’m not worried about that. I thought you saw for yourself, I’m not as helpless as it first seemed, right?” She waved her hand, but even that gesture felt forced and fake so she dropped her hand back to the skates in her arms.

“I know, but…but this guys is not something we consider lightly. He’s been dead, he was something a lot of people in Pompeii had to put down together after a lot of sacrifice. He had been killing in secret for years and we were too disjointed and blind to notice until it was almost too late. We like our privacy and we don’t socialize as well as you might think.”

“You have so many celebrations together though.” She thought back to the bonfires and the fireworks and the Founders Day festival.

“True, but those were never so big a deal or so widely shared until this last generation.” He nodded at where Haku was skating around Suigetsu and Sasuke on the ice. Itachi was at the edge of the lake talking to Kisame. “Our nature is to stay with our own kind. A long time ago he took advantage of that and fed on the people who didn’t have large tribes or famalies. We lost a lot of citizens that way, and it was a bigger deal because Pompeii was supposed to be the place, the one place where we could go to be safe from persecution. He defiled our sanctuary.”

Something biting took hold of Sakura’s gut and she grimaced. “Do you think that…that was what… do you think he had anything to do with what I saw in the forest, because I’m one of those on their own people?” she asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

She felt fear in her spine when she looked up at Zabuza’s face and saw wide eyes, but he reached forward and held onto her shoulders with both hands, dropping his skates in the snow between them. “Hey, look at me.” He waited until she lifted her eyes before he said anything more. “Don’t worry about that at all. No, that’s not his MO and he’s dead as can be. Don’t worry about this. You’re not alone, you have us.”

Buried under the earth, branches and roots closing in overhead, dirt falling down her lungs, mud clogging her throat…

Sakura shook the shiver off and managed another smile. “Yeah, I know. I didn’t mean it like that. Thank you for watching out for me. I’ll continue to be careful.”

“We’re watching out for you,” he said before squeezing her shoulders and then stepping back to pick up his skates. “Now come on and put your blades on. Icarus doesn’t freeze over very often and never for long. You need to take advantage of it when you can.”

Sakura followed him over to the bench where Kisame was sitting all on his own, watching Itachi skate after Sasuke and the others. Kisame had one boot on and was working out a knot on the other with his clumsy fingers. Sakura chuckled at the sight before pulling the skate out of his hands and onto her lap. She worked on the knot for a minute before it was undone.
Zabuza laced himself up in record time and was on the ice before Sakura could even slip on one of her shoes. Kisame stayed on the bench, waiting for her to finish and once she was done he stood and held out a hand for her to take.

“I do know how to skate. I’ve been doing it since I was young,” she said.

“I kinda just want an excuse to hold your hand. Let me?” Kisame laughed, face coloring a bit at his own boldness.

Sakura laughed and it was a crisp sound, like bird songs or bells. It was honest and not one of those forced laughs. It felt good to laugh. It felt good to be happy.

She held his hand part way but once she was at the center of the lake she broke away and pumped her legs to gain speed. Kisame followed after her, keeping close. After a little while Itachi drifted in behind her, on the opposite side from where Kisame trailed. The Uchiha smirked at Kisame and then leaned in, increasing his speed. Sakura bent into the wind and pumped her legs faster, starting to pull away from the both of them.

Sakura had never been a very good figure skater, though she had dreamed of it once in her girlhood. By the time she was old enough to actually skate on her own, she realized that the ice was a joy to be on not because of dances or twirls. She had quickly fallen out of love with the idea of being a figure skater in favor of something else: speed.

The wind was amazing to endure but Sakura leaned into it and then tilted dangerously to one side, making a turn around the edge of the lake where the ice was thickest. Itachi and Kisame both trailed, but neither were able to catch up with her. The minute one of them started to gain she would push herself, pumping her legs and leaning in closer to the ice to increase her speed. She was cutting across the ice faster than any of the others. She passed Suigetsu like he was standing still and didn’t even see Sasuke.

Oh this was fun.

Her hair had been pulled back and tucked under a hat, but that flew off like a flash of red in the wind and her hair was wild and flapping around her face as she pulled even further away from the trailing males.

On a tight turn she could see Kisame out of the corner of her eye, but Itachi’s dark form was missing. She pulled out of the turn, straightening out and nearly crashed when she saw Itachi’s form right in front of her. He had cut across the ice to head her off.

Sakura was fast, but she wasn’t a fast thinker all the time. She had been so caught up in gaining speed and hadn’t heard Itachi move. She was gaining way too fast on Itachi’s form and she didn’t know what else to do other than pull away, across the ice on a sharp turn that ended up being too sharp. She cut left across the open lake and leaned in too far, tumbling head and shoulders over toe, careful to keep the blades away from the rest of her. The ice was hard on impact, but held as she banged her arms and knees something awful.

She heard someone cursing as she slid to a stop over the center of the lake above a particularly clear patch of ice. Something below he waters, something gray or white in a dead looking way, slithered through the water and then was gone behind a shadow. Sakura blinked and saw the shadows were actual structures. Pushing up she got on her hands and turned over to sit on her butt while looking down at the scene below her.

“Sakura, are you okay?” Itachi was quick to reach her and crouch down alongside her. Behind him
Kisame was cursing and trailing after.

“There’s a city down there!” Sakura exclaimed, voice high and eyes wide. Her nose was nipped and red from the cold, but she felt great. When she saw Itachi looking down at her she smiled so easily and pointed to the ice below her. “Look.”

“I know, that’s Icarus, the town that was here before Pompeii.”

Itachi reached for her and looked at her knees and elbows that were wet from where they scraped the ice. There were no tears in the fabric, but she winced when he touched her knee and he whined, knowing that would mean a bruise at the very least.

“I’m fine. Wait, what do you mean before Pompeii? Kisame, what’s inside Icarus?”

She looked up at the big blue man who was now looming over them. Kisame shot Itachi a dark look that Itachi shrugged off before kneeling down alongside her to see what she was pointing to.

“Are you talking about the church steeple?” he asked.

“No, not just that, all of it.” Sakura brushed some of the loose snow off the ice to see better. “There’s like a whole other town down there.”

“Before Pompeii, way back in the first years of this country, there was a settlement in the lake made by humans. It was abandoned because of the volcano and then the first founders came. After the maiden’s sacrifice the town was filled with water and the merkin and water folks came to inhabit it as the rest of the town grew. There’s a lot of buildings down there in the lake. We swim in and out of them all the time.”

“I had no idea,” Sakura breathed, amazed by the sight below her. “That’s so cool.”

“It is pretty neat, I guess,” Kisame chuckled, coloring in the face once more as he grinned sloppily and rubbed the back of his neck.

Itachi made a small exhaling sound and let his lids drop halfway as he looked away from his friend and preened over Sakura some more.

“I apologize for surprising you like that,” Itachi interrupted, picking at her loose hair and pushing it back. “Please forgive me. I did not anticipate your panic. I forget myself sometimes.”

“Ah, that’s fine. I didn’t get hurt,” Sakura said, still watching the ice for another sign of whatever it was she saw earlier. When she looked up Itachi was frowning down at her. “What?”

“Don’t forget your own needs, doctor.” He touched her elbow again and she winced at the contact and then shot him a dirty look when it seemed as if he had won.

“I’m fine. It’s too cold to feel any pain and I’ll be fine. I expected to take a few tumbles on the ice today. I wasn’t a great skater when I was a kid, either.”

Kisame stood and offered her his hands. She took them and lifted herself up and then pushed away, gliding backwards. Itachi was faster and caught her shoulders and stopped her. She looked up and frowned.

“Now what?”

“I’m never going to hear the end of it if I don’t do this.” He sighed over her shoulders and then
looked up at Kisame who’s eyes had gone wide as he started to skate towards them, struggling to make that initial traction.

“Itachi, don’t you dare!”

Sakura saw behind Itachi that Sasuke was gone in a swirl of feathers leaving Suigetsu to sputter and Haku to brush off in indifference. Zabuza was picking something red out of the snow off to the side and pocketing it.

The world around her shimmered. Sakura felt her stomach roll. Oh.

“Sorry, friend. But I made a promise to my family for today and she needs minor medical attention.”

Sakura almost responded about how she was the doctor and the only one qualified to make that decision, but her gut lurched and she felt the world rip around her as feather flew in a cyclone around them and the space was torn asunder. She shuddered, close as she could get to Itachi, and then stumbled when the ice below her skates turned to dirt.

Sakura yelped at the different terrain and nearly dipped backwards, but Itachi caught her easily and lifted her up into his arms, bridal style, keeping her blades off the ground.

“Ugh,” Sakura groaned, reaching to wrap her arms around his head to keep from tilting back any further or possibly falling out of his arms. “Don’t you think you could warn me about your plans next time?”

“I was actually trying to be good and play fair, but if I didn’t kidnap you today I risked the wrath of Izuna, which is not a wrath you would ever want to risk. He’s looking forward to your planned medical visit this Sunday, but he said he couldn’t wait.”

Sakura sighed, letting her head roll to his chest and her eyes fall shut. She could still feel the lurch of the transportation and wanted to just stay still until her head and stomach both calmed. “Don’t move so much.”

“I’ll try not to.

His skates are off in the dirt beside his bare feet and he’s walking towards the traditional styled estate. He stops at the porch to bend down and set her on the end, leaving her feet to dangle. She sways a bit and he steadies her before reaching down for her ankles. He takes one and begins to tug on the laces, loosening the skate’s hold around her ankle. He does one, slowly slides it off her foot, and then does the other. On the second one her sock gets caught and is dragged away with the shoe and he chuckles before reaching for it.

“Hold still,” he whispers before lifting her ankle up and curling her sock back over her foot, slowly, bit by bit, tracing her skin with the pads of his fingertips before smoothing the opening of the sock around her leg. He rubs his thumb into the space under her ankle and she shivers, making him smile through his own flush.

Sakura attempts to stand but still stumbles, dizzy from something she is not used to.

“I’m sorry.”

She looks up when she hears his voice. Her face is filled with expression that asks the question even though her words do not. ‘What for?’

“I did that without asking for your consent, even when I have chastised others for acting in equally
reckless manners. I should have warned you or asked for your permission before spiriting you away. Forgive me this long fought habit. It is in our natures, but we know better.”

Sakura waved it off. “It’s fine. I’ll be good in a minute or two. I’m just hoping Kisame isn’t too mad at you. He looked pissed.”

Itachi chuckled. “I had a hard time holding myself back after I heard what you said to Zabuza.”

Sakura stilled, thinking back to her conversation with Zabuza. Itachi had been so far away, she had been sure he wouldn’t be able to hear them. But what had she said that made Itachi act in such a way?

“What do you mean?” Sakura asks, reaching up when Itachi leans in to pick her up and hold her in his arms, bridal style once more. Her knees are still sore and she doesn’t mind being spoiled a little bit right now. She knows Itachi well enough to trust him this much.

Itachi slides the door ahead of him open with his toe and Sakura hears the gasps of delight from Shisui and turns to see Izuna and Madara brighten up at the sight of her. Sasuke is in the room grinning as well and feathers are out as Uchiha rush forward to greet her. She almost doesn’t hear what Itachi whispers in her ear.

“You have a family here with us. You’re one of ours.”
“Pancakes?” Sakura asked, not turning as she flipped the batter over in the pan.

“With chocolate chips?” Ino said, slouching into one of the rickety, mismatched chairs around Sakura’s kitchen table.

“What else?” said Sakura.

“You’re a godsend!” Ino moaned into her arms.

“I try,” Sakura said, finally turning to give her friend a smile. She paused, taking in Ino’s entire vestige. While gorgeous as always, Ino was not exactly pristine. Her hair was down for a change and Sakura spotted several tangling knots. “Wow, you were not kidding about not being a morning person.”

Ino deigned to raise herself from her arms, glaring balefully in Sakura’s direction. “I wasn’t as a child and decades later I’m still not.”

Sakura placed a plate in front of Ino, patting her shoulder in sympathy before taking a seat in the faded red wicker chair across from her. “You still haven’t explained the age thing to me. The rest call you and Naruto and the rest ‘babies’ but you’ve been alive for decades?”

Ino shrugged. “Couple centuries. Everyone ages differently. I only recently reached maturity. So I was technically a kid when I was your pen pal.” Sakura nodded, digging into her pancakes. “Gods above and below!” Ino exclaimed. “These are amazing.”

“Better than Choji’s?” Sakura teased.

Ino glanced around furtively, smile curled and pleased. “Just don’t let him know.” Her smile faded into a scowl as her gaze focused on a spot above Sakura’s head. “What is that?”

“What is what?” Sakura asked, alarmed, as she patted her hair. “What?” The that in question floated down from its place in Sakura’s hair, landing innocuously on the table. Sakura laughed, relieved. “It’s a feather.”

Ino didn’t look nearly so satisfied, snatching the feather up and examining it with an expert eye. She snorted. “They’re quite terrible at preening,” she muttered, tone strangely victorious. She turned cornflower blue eyes on Sakura. “Why exactly were you at the Uchiha compound?”

“Itachi whisked me away,” Sakura replied with an eye roll, feeling warm all over as she remembered his words. *Family*. “I stayed for dinner.”
Ino didn’t say anything, returning to her stack of pancakes with an angry vigor. Sakura returned to eating as well, squirming as the silence veered into awkward, strained territory.

“Thanks for coming with me today,” Sakura said. “I know it’s really early in the day.” She gestured to the colorful sky outside; the vestige of sunrise.

“Oh of course!” Ino said, brightening once more. “I’m glad you asked me to come. Trust me, it’s really easy to lose yourself at the market.”

“I have no doubt,” Sakura said, glancing at Ino’s hair once more. She itched to tease out the tangles. “Ino, is it alright if I braid your hair?”

At worst, Sakura expected a gentle letdown if Ino didn’t want her hair touched by inexperienced hands. After all, Ino was a hairstylist herself.

She did not expect Ino to leap to her feet, flushing. “U-um, I-I mean… I didn’t expect… it’s fine with me,” Ino said, ending on a nervous giggle as she took her seat once more.

“Are you sure it’s alright?” Sakura asked, wary of Ino’s response.

“It’s fine,” Ino said, grin wide. “I just… it was unexpected.”

“Okay,” Sakura said, standing up and moving behind Ino’s seat. “Are you sure?” she asked, wanting to make sure her friend was comfortable.

“Yes!” Ino yelped. She cleared her throat and said more quietly, “Yes.”

With tentative hands, Sakura carded her fingers along Ino’s scalp. Her hair was thick and luxurious, moving through Sakura’s fingers like liquid silk. Ino released a noise that sounded suspiciously like a whimper. Sakura paused but Ino did not move.

Shrugging, Sakura continued on, drawing her fingers down through the knots and unweaving them with gentle patience. She was in awe of Ino’s hair, its length and softness were extraordinary.

Ino leaned into her touch, soaking it in with small sighs of contentment and satisfaction. Her fingers curled into the surface of the table as Sakura began the process of separating her hair for braiding.

“Oh alright there?” Sakura asked, bemusement clear.

“Perfect,” Ino replied, tempted to curl into a ball and drag Sakura with her. Build up a room of soft and shiny things…

“And done,” Sakura proclaimed, tying the end result off with a hairband. “Not half bad if I do say so myself.”

Ino managed to conceal her disappointment at the end of the experience, instead leaping to her feet. “Let me see! Let me see!”

Sakura laughed, leading her into the bathroom.

Ino examined the fishtail braid from all angles, assessing the look with a critical eye. Sakura did her best not to feel nervous. Her work being scrutinized so closely put her a bit on edge. Of course, she’d experienced all sorts of evaluations while in medical school and residency but this was different. This was a field that she had no real experience in and she was being judged by an expert.

Ino turned to her, expression solemn. Sakura felt her heart fall. “It’s gorgeous!” Ino said, pulling
Sakura into a hug as she jumped up and down. “Thank you, thank you!”

Sakura laughed, caught up in Ino’s giddiness. “Glad you like it! It’s been a while since I’ve done anyone’s hair.”

“If you decide that the doctor’s life isn’t for you let me know,” Ino said, adjusting the braid to fall over her shoulder. “I could use a stylist like you at the salon.”

Sakura flushed with pleasure, shaking her head. “Oh stop.”

“I shan’t,” Ino replied, linking their arms. “We need to get going. The door will only be open for a little bit longer this morning.”

Sakura, though not quite understanding, nodded in agreement and followed Ino outside, glad for her winter wear: a red pea coat and navy scarf combination that protected her from the bracing chill. It was truly winter now and the wind buffeted Sakura’s face until it chafed. She and Ino made their way out beneath the watery, rising sun as they headed into the center of town.

“Shouldn’t we head for your car?” Sakura asked, looking around the downtown area.

Everything was still covered in snow and the weak sunlight splayed across the icicles that lingered upon buildings and trees like thousands of glimmering fairy lights. The most eye-catching piece of all was the grouping of ash trees that sprawled out in the middle of the square. It was affectionately termed the “doorway tree” from its numerous openings that weaved in and out of each other, creating spaces of empty air or “doorways.” The tree, rather, trees were rumored to have been there long before Pompeii existed.

Perhaps before Icarus too…

“No silly,” Ino said, smiling at Sakura in that way many Pompeii residents regarded her: fond patronization. It was like she was missing some piece of the puzzle; a page from the story everyone else knew by heart. “As I said, we’re using the door.”

Sakura blinked, looking at the doorway tree once more. It was more than large enough for a person to pass through any of those negative spaces…

“Truly?” Sakura said, feeling a grin spread across her face.

“Yes,” Ino said. “I got the tickets from Minato last week so we’re good to go. We just need to pass them to him…”

“Ino, Dr. Haruno!”

“Speak of the devil,” Ino murmured as they turned to Minato. “Good to see you, mayor!”

“I was worried you two weren’t going to make it!” he said, tucking his hands into his pockets with a harried look. “The portal is closing in ten minutes. It’ll reopen at 4:44 this afternoon. It’ll stay open for an hour and eleven minutes. Make sure you come back through by then!” He waggled a finger in their faces. “Kushina would have my hide!”

“No worries, Minato!” Ino said, placing two orange slips of paper into his open hand. “We’re punctual.”

Minato hummed, still regarding them with worry as the tickets in his hand went up in a cloud of glittery smoke. “Be careful. There’s a few others from town visiting the market today, though you
know already that it is no guarantee that you’ll meet up over there.” He guided them around the side of the tree, to a place where a ladder led up to a higher opening in the tree. It was at least fifteen feet up. “Right here, ladies.”

Sakura watched as Ino climbed up the ladder, doing her best to ignore her rising hesitation.

“I’ll go through first and wait for you on the other side,” Ino said. “There will be a…swooping sensation as you step through. You know, like a first flight, only worst.”

Sakura did not have a chance to say that she had not, in fact, experienced flight outside of planes and the Uchiha. She had the feeling that wasn’t what Ino was talking about. Sakura climbed to the final rung, staring through the negative space. There was nothing extraordinary about it; Sakura could see the pale wood of the other side of the tree. However, Ino was gone, just like that.

She could do this. She’d weathered scarier things.

She closed her eyes for a brief moment before pitching herself forward.

There was in fact a strange, swooping sensation that yanked at the space behind her bellybutton. Before that, however, she opened her eyes to grey surroundings, ensconced in glimmering, glittery crystals. There was this weightlessness that accompanied her, something that made her think that this was what space might be like, if space was the place Between. It was soothing and Sakura found herself drifting as if cast out to sea for what could have been scant seconds or infinite eternities.

Suddenly she was in a thick copse of trees. She was naked. The trees’ needles were heavy and weighed down and scratched across her bare skin. Sakura clutched at her arms, unable to ignore the rasping whispers of the trees, some long forgotten language harsh against her ears.

She tried to move, tried to fight as the trees closed in around her, but she was helpless as their chanting picked up.

Sakura could only watch with horror as the branches closed in around her, swallowing her whole.

Then, she was reeled in by the tug that centered at her gut. Sakura came back into herself, balanced on hands and knees and dry heaving.

Cool hands cupped her face and stroked back along her neck and back soothingly. As the ringing left her ears, Sakura could make out the nonsense comfort words that Ino repeated over and over.

Sakura sat back on her haunches, smiling up at Ino. “Not a chance that I’m wasting my breakfast this morning.”

Ino laughed lightly, hands still making circular motions on her back. “Sorry about that. The first time is the worst. I didn’t think to warn you.”

“It’s fine,” Sakura said, accepting Ino’s assistance to stand.

Ino’s hands fluttered around Sakura, still guilty over her mistake. Ino cleared her throat, guiding her friend away from the cave they emerged from. She turned Sakura toward the revelry that was going on below them. “Welcome to the Goblin Market.”

Arid, desert air pressed warmly against what little of Sakura’s skin was bared. Sakura unfurled her scarf and slid free of her coat, staring down at the market laid out before her. She could see no end to the jewel toned tops of different pavilions that were settled among the sand. The sun beat down upon them, high past noon.
“Where are we?” Sakura asked, blinking against the harsh sunlight.

“This week’s location for the market,” Ino said. She squinted, examining their surroundings. “I think we are in Hathor. It’s in Sudan.”

Sakura glanced at her friend. “Sudan, the country in Africa.” It wasn’t a question, more just a statement to help her come to terms with the reality of the moment. “Huh.”

Ino laughed, shaking her head. “C’mon now. We have quite a bit to explore.”

Sakura grabbed Ino’s hand, running down the hill as quickly as she can. She heard Ino’s breathless giggles as Sakura led the charge into the marketplace. They fell into the throng of people and Sakura breathed in the smells of the place deeply, placing jasmine and cedar, probably wafting from the potions tent she could see up ahead to the left.

“Where to first?” Ino asked, taking in Sakura’s gobsmacked expression.

Sakura glanced around at the booths, different in every way possible. She settled on one of the tents that was a deep magenta and quite tall, filled to the brim with all sorts of shiny trinkets. The shopkeeper was a tottering old woman covered with charms that seemed the same as those within the shop. “Here?” Sakura said, somewhat hesitant.

“Good choice,” Ino said. “I need to refresh the charms for my house. And dad’s been nagging me about getting him a cleanliness one. His wore out after only two weeks.” She smirked at Sakura. “I’m not sure if it was the shoddy craftsmanship or the chaos of the house that did it in.”

Ino traded gossip with the old woman who ran the booth as Sakura browsed. There were protection spells from all around the world. She saw brightly colored omamori, small and large ankhs, and items that she couldn’t even identify. Sakura hesitated, tracing her fingers listlessly over one of the ankhs.

Maybe…

Maybe there was something here to help with the dreams?

“Hey, Sakura!” Ino called, bustling over. “I’m heading next door real quick, it’s the potions stall; you can’t miss it.”

“Be safe,” Sakura said.

Ino blew a raspberry and floated out the door, carrying a small bag filled with her purchases.

“You’re going to be a hard one.”

Sakura turned, startled, relaxing as she stared down at the wizened shopkeeper. “Sorry, what was that?”

“You’ve got a touch of darkness on you,” the woman said, grabbing Sakura’s hand within both of her own. Her rings and amulets brushed roughly across Sakura’s skin. The woman’s eyes went milky as she stared over Sakura’s shoulder. “It’s something ancient, certainly not of your own doing.” Her eyes turned gold. “My, my, what’s this?” she exclaimed, a surprised smile pulling at her lips. “Haven’t seen magic this old in…well…ever.”

“Is that bad?” Sakura asked, mouth twisting in a frown.

The woman shrugged. “Who can say? Old magic like this is fickle and quite finicky. As of now
everything seems to be well...you’ve just been brushed with it.”

“Great,” Sakura said drily.

The woman leaned up, cupping Sakura’s face. She clucked. “That bit of darkness, however, is hurting you. Come with me.”

Sakura followed the woman into the back of the shop. There was a little workshop in the back, the place where the woman obviously made her craft. There were stacks of boxes filled with feathers, with twinkling jewels and bits of stardust, with shrunken heads and needles. In short, the room was pandemonium.

“Now, I only make the ankhs by hand,” the woman said, wading into the mess and rifling about. “Protection charms are a dangerous craft and they can backfire quite easily. I get the omamori from a miko in the Tokyo region, lovely girl really and a time traveler to boot. However, what you need is something a little different.” The small woman made a sound of triumph and made her way through the mire back to Sakura. “Here!”

Sakura stared down at the circular object the woman placed in her hands. It was a dreamcatcher. It wasn’t one of those gaudy ones that Sakura saw at carnivals. It was made of willow, the natural wood clear as a flowering pattern of web ran through the middle. Pale feathers were attached at the bottom and at the very center of the web were two beads, one purple and the other white.

“This should keep the darkness from festering in your night terrors,” the woman said sagely. “It’s made by the Ojibwe people. Trust me, it’s as authentic a bawaajige nagwaagan you can get.”

Sakura nodded, still smoothing her fingers across the soft, flexible wood.

“Let’s go back to the front dear and I’ll ring you up.”

Sakura was thankful to find that instantaneous travel between countries and continents did not, in fact, prevent her from using her debit card here in Hathor.

She exchanged goodbyes with the woman and headed out into the street, excited to show Ino her purchase.

Only Ino was nowhere to be found.

Sakura bit back a groan of frustration, turning to look through the crowd. The press of people around her was much too thick and she found herself moving among the vendors, not really looking at their wares as she searched for Ino.

Sakura continued her search for over an hour before finally electing to sit down on an empty bench, releasing a defeated groan. There was no chance she could find Ino, not in a such a sprawling place like this.

Certainly, Sakura could always return to Pompeii; she knew the way. Surely, Ino would follow.

Still, she wanted to find her friend and enjoy their time here together.

She didn’t have much longer before she would need to head back to the transport site. She didn’t want to be late.

Sakura placed her head in her hands, glum.
She blinked as what appeared to be a bubble floated in between her knees, popping against the rough wood of the bench. It was a bubble.

Sakura looked up as more bubbles began to sail by lazily, twisting with the wind. The sun splayed off of them, creating wonderful, multi-faceted prisms of light. Sakura kept her fingers gentle as she grazed the bubbles, trying to catch one. It didn’t quite work as they kept breaking. She couldn’t keep from laughing as one brushed against her nose and popped.

Another laugh joined hers.

Sakura startled, turning, red-faced in embarrassment, to see her new bench mate. He was quite slender and tall, his frame bent in what seemed an uncomfortable position to sit upon the bench. He wore his dark hair long over one eye. His expression was calm, peaceful even as he watched her with mirth. Between his lips, a long, slender pipe was held from which the bubbles emerged.

“Thanks,” Sakura said, still trying to fight down her initial reaction of embarrassment. “I needed cheering up.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” the man replied. He smiled, ever so slightly. “Especially when my audience gives such an… adorable response.”

Sakura cleared her throat, scuffing her feet against the cobbled street. “I’m Sakura.”

“Utakata,” he said, still eyeing her with blatant fascination and amusement.

“You from around here?” she asked, deciding that it was best to focus her attention to the bubbles he continued to blow as she made small talk.

“Not quite,” he said. “And neither are you.”

It wasn’t a question.

Sakura cast him a quick look but he was surveying the people around him.

“This is your first visit to the market,” Utakata said, taking a deep breath and blowing.

Bubbles larger than Sakura’s fist moved past her. “Is it that obvious?” she said.

He inclined his head. “Many are harried, even after years of coming to the market. No need to fret.”

Sakura hummed in agreement and they fell into a companionable silence, just watching the distorted shapes of people through the bubbles. There was something tranquil in this moment, a fragile sort of armistice threatened by the very thought of speaking now. The shouts of the vendors and the conversations of the consumers faded into white noise. She had nothing to worry about.

“Sakura!”

Sakura was jarred from her daze, leaping to her feet. “Ino!”

“I’ve been looking all over for you!” they exclaimed at the same time.

They both paused before laughing.

“Well,” Ino said, “we need to get back. It’s drawing late. I promise I’ll stick to you like an adhesive binding spell the next time.”
“You mean glue?” Sakura asked.

Ino flapped a hand.

Sakura turned back to Utakata. “Thank you for keeping me company, Utakata,” she said quietly.

He smiled, bubbles filling the air around them. “As I said, it was my pleasure. Until next time Sakura.”

Utakata watched as the duo scurried off in the direction of the west transport site. He took a long draw from his pipe, blowing bubbles through his nose. A smile lit his lips. “I wonder what the weather in Pompeii is like this time of year?”

He stood, taking off in the opposite direction, a lively spring to his step.

Only one way to find out.
After the Goblin Market Sakura was surprised she was as tired as she was. Ino had told her that might happen, some people got sicker than others, and first timers were especially susceptible to the extra drain Sakura was feeling. She sank into the flush of her couch and let her body sink. It had been hard to keep up with Ino and hide how drained she really was. Ino already felt bad about being absent minded on a few things, Sakura didn’t want to make her friend feel worse about anything else.

‘But aren’t you going to be doing that eventually? You’re such a vapor in comparison to them, smoke in the wind. Their childhoods are longer than our entire lifespan.’

Sakura looked up and blinked. There was no one in the room with her but she knew the voice in her head had no physical body. She sometimes imagined it as a black and white reverse image of herself. It helped to get on top of her depression when her suggestive thoughts had a body.

‘That doesn’t change anything. I’ve not been dishonest with anyone, I’ve never lied to any of them. I can’t change what’s going to happen to me. I’ll age, that’s inevitable.’ Sakura focused on the visualization of her thoughts and glared harder. ‘I’m not going to worry about it.’

The black and white reverse image of Sakura shrugged. ‘You’re well loved, but that’s only because you’re so new, you’re an oddity. It’s not because of you. It’s not really about you. You’re just a thing for them to play with; a doll.’

Sakura swallowed and felt for the fabric of her pants, the rough material, the end of her shirt, the skin of her opposite wrists. She smelled the dust and the wood in her home. The old candles still had a lingering scent she could identify. She was in her home and she was safe.

‘I know my own worth and it’s not dependent on anyone else’s attention or interest. I know my worth and it has not diminished.’ She remembered the attention and the flattering memories and stepped on top of them. ‘I can’t control what anyone else thinks or does, but I am my own person with my own worth.’

‘You’re sort of a terrible doctor for this town. You don’t know anything about half these-’

“That’s enough!” Sakura said out loud.

The image in front of her staggered, flickered, and vanished. She hadn’t been a ghost or a haunting spirit or something magical or supernatural. She didn’t burn up in a blaze of fire or break apart in a ring of salt. She was a symptom of something natural that Sakura wasn’t ashamed to admit to anymore.

She had always had issues with feelings of self worth, stemming back to when she was a child too eager to please in a classroom with too many kids, in a family with too little time, in a relationship with too little love. But, she was a doctor and she had a name for what she fought. This didn’t make her broken and this didn’t make her any less of a person. Sakura knew her worth. She knew she was better than her worst thoughts and that it wasn’t any good dwelling on her basic fears. She would save her energies for other battles. Battles with curses and dark magics and things in the woods that didn’t like her for some odd reason.
Sakura sagged down in her seat and felt with her hand for the paper her dreamcatcher had been wrapped with. She heard the crackle before she saw it. Lazy as a housefly, she shifted in her seat and pulled the paper onto her lap and started to tug at the tape. It came away easy enough. The small sounds in the still of her room made the back of her neck tingle. She felt like there was a nest at the base of her brain behind her head that turned happy at the small sounds.

She had burned out all the way like a candle on a stick.

Sakura turned into the couch and hugged the dream catcher to her chest, too tired to hang it. Regardless, her dreams were free of nightmares. Sakura slept soundly through the night for the first time in a long time.

“It’s super fun when we have to treat people who don’t want to be treated,” Sakura sighed with a smile as she sagged down onto the arm of Shizune’s chair. Through the window she watched the fire dwarf stride away with a haughty sort of waddle. Sakura’s grin thinned.

“You should have seen him before with the other doctors. He seemed to like you.”

Sakura snickered. “I ended up yelling at him and he cussed me out more than anyone I’ve ever met.”

Shizune chuckled. “That’s how they talk to everyone. But at least he paid. He wouldn’t have done that upfront if he didn’t respect you.” She punched Sakura’s shoulder lightly. “Cheer up, you’re doing great.”

Sakura shook her head. “And to think, when I first got here I was more worried about my bedside manner. I was sort of stiff and thought that would be an issue outside of the city. But now…I just worry about a lot of other different things.”

“You shouldn’t. You’re doing fine. You’re doing better than fine, everyone loves you!”

Sakura thinned her lips and narrowed her eyes in a disbelieving way.

The conversation broke with a cry from the doorway closest to the main street. Sakura sat up in her seat, wondering if the sound was meant for her office or the dentist’s office next door. They shared a walkway on the main street entrance and were close enough that they could hear each other on occasions.

“I think that’s next door.” Shizune stood up however and held a hand up to her chin, listening harder. “Oh.”

“What?”

Shizune shook her head. “I’m pretty sure that’s for next door, but I don’t know how they’ll manage with the way he’s carrying on. Ino’s with him, so they should be okay…”

Sakura started trotting towards the door and reached for it, peeking out and seeing a tussle between three people on the sidewalk. She had to blink because two people looked like clones of each other. Ino and Kimimaro were easy enough to pick out, but there was a third member that looked way too much like Ino for it to be a coincidence. Both had long blond hair pulled up in ponytails and wide blue eyes…or eye? She only saw one on the man.

“I already told you I’m not going in there. I don’t trust him!”
“You have to,” Ino hissed back. “You’re sick!”

The dentist was struggling to help the pair inside but didn’t say anything until Ino slipped. He moved to catch her and the male started to slip free. He took a few steps and then staggered, clutching his wrist. Sakura saw this and started trotting down the steps to help him. His hand was bandaged and seeping red.

“You’re hurt.”

He glared up at her, wincing in pain. “No shit lady, what are you, some sorta doctor, un?”

Sakura didn’t recognize him but realized this was because they had never met. It was something that made her pause and blink. “Yeah, I’m the new doctor here. You need a doctor?”

The male stilled and looked up at her, almost not believing her. But then Ino came up alongside him and grabbed him in a big bear hug that was more of a grapple.

“Sakura, don’t let him get away!” Ino called before completing her grapple. “Get back here Deidara! You need to see someone about this.”

“I’m not going to that damn dentist I’m going to see this doctor!” The blond struggles, but was still in pain by the way he held his bandaged, bleeding hand.

Sakura looked up at Kimimaro who looked more haggard than anything. He shot her a pleading look that she understood. Both had taken oaths to do their best and help to the best of their ability and do no harm.

“Come inside, Ino bring him, I’ll see what I can do.”

Sakura waved them both in and to her great relief they both complied without issue. Kimimaro trailed behind them and paused next to Sakura.

“You’ll need my help in there to know what to do, but will you treat him? There was an incident several decades ago and he doesn’t like me very much.”

Sakura didn’t want to pry but nodded and resolved to ask about it later. “Sure, get in and tell me what he needs. It was his hand that looked hurt, not his teeth.”

Kimimaro sighed. “Well, you’ll see what I mean in a moment.”

Sakura went in before him and saw Shizune usher the pair into an empty room and glare at Kimimaro as he entered. Sakura wanted to ask even more but kept it to herself. She rolled her shoulders and followed them into the room, trailing after the older blond’s cursing for Ino to get out and leave him alone.

“I-I’ll be outside then, I’ll wait, you’ll be fine.”

Ino looked to Sakura, nodding, before backing out of the room. Kimimaro waited on the threshold and Sakura winced. She would call for him if she needed him, but if Deidara didn’t want him near, Sakura couldn’t allow it.

“You’re not even a good doctor.’

Sakura looked back to the blond and nodded. “Your name?”

The hair in his face his one of his eyes and was stuck with cold sweat to his skin, but she could see
some sort of device, like a metal patch, over the obscured socket peeking through the strands. Still, he looked up at her and seemed to take in the entirety of her before swallowing and offering up a name.

“Deidara.”

His name felt heavy, like it was supposed to mean something, but she didn’t know what. All she could do was smile and try to make him feel safe.

“It’s nice to meet you, Deidara. I’m Sakura, the new doctor around here. I’m still meeting new people all the time so bear with me if I ask you your name again or mess up the pronunciation. I’ve gotten chewed out for that once already today,” she said with a chuckle, thinking back to the dwarf and his seven word name.

He swallowed again and nodded. “Yeah, I’ve not see you before, un.”

“Yeah, I still get that. What can I help you with today? You looked a little in pain when we brought you in.” Sakura started to reach for his hand, the one bandaged and seeping, but stopped. Her fingers hovered in place as she waited till his eyes met hers. “May I?”

He offered her his hand and started unwrapping for her. She picked up the bandage and finished the process, wincing when she saw the dark color stains that told her this was a long term injury, or one that had been hurting him for a while. The blood was old and smelled.

There was a long line draw horizontally across his palm and she suspected it of being the cause of it all before the line shifted, turned out, and the barest hint of lip began to show, followed by a gaping mouth complete with teeth and a tongue. The blood was coming from the gum under his upper canines where a long gash had failed to heal. He needed oral stitches in his mouth, explaining Kimimaro.

“Oh my, that looks nasty,” Sakura murmured, taking his hand and drawing it closer. “Can you tell me how this happened or what was used?”

She waited a moment, studying it further before having to look up when she heard no answer. Deidara was watching her, brows drawn, expression pensive. He swallowed again and Sakura started to get the impression that he was nervous around her.

“I’m sorry if I’m being rude or invasive. I just need to ascertain the nature of this injury and your cooperation would be helpful, but if you don’t want to talk about it you don’t have to.”

She still held his hand in hers and that’s where his focus seemed to stay. When he spoke he didn’t meet her eyes. “It was a fall. I just fell and I tried to catch myself and it was open and it hurt so I bandaged it and came to Ino to see if she could help me, but she tried to take me to the dentist.”

“That’s where you’re supposed to go. Oral surgery is what they’re known for. I could stitch you up, but I’d probably need his guidance and help so that I do it properly. Honestly I’m not the most confident in my ability to do this sort of work but I’ll do what I can and stay here if that’s what you want.”

“I-I don’t trust that guy.”

Sakura stirred in Sakura’s chest and she had the suspicion that there was a story there, but clamped down on that feeling hard because now was not the right time to be nosy and ask around. It didn’t matter what these people meant to each other. She had a job to do.
“If you feel that way I won’t leave you alone with him, but I do need his help for this. Will you allow that?”

He looked up at her, meeting her gaze with his own and she heard a muffled whirring, like tiny gears shifting. She saw behind his long blond bang the surface of his metal patch shifting.

“You won’t leave?”

“I swear you won’t be alone with him. I’ll be here the whole time, and I can have Ino stay in the room as well if that’s what you want.” Ino would have to wash up and prep, but Sakura was only doing minor surgery. Ino wouldn’t be an issue.

Deidara frowned. “No, she can stay out there, she’d just distract everyone with her loud mouth.”

“That’s fine. I’m going to find the dentist and have a word with him. He’ll likely need his tools so it will be a few minutes. When I come back I’ll prep the area as best I can and get you comfortable. Wait for me here and don’t move.”

Sakura started to take her gloves off and toss them into the trash on the way out, satisfied with his weak nod. In the waiting room she found Ino but no Kimimaro. Sakura looked around but couldn’t catch sight of him. Had he gone back already?

“Where did he go?” she asked Ino.

For her part, Ino looked a little shell shocked. “He-he was I think he went to talk to Shizune. I think he just went into your office looking for her.”

Sakura nodded, but kept the frown off her face when she heard plates and forks being moved around from the kitchen area where Shizune was taking her lunch break. It didn’t make sense for Kimimaro to go anywhere else looking for the other woman.

“I’m going to need his help for the surgery. Thankfully it’s minor and nothing needs extensive work, but it’s oral so I do need a dentist to help keep me from making any mistakes. He agreed to have Kimimaro help, but I will be staying in the room the whole time. Will you be fine waiting out here until it’s done?”

“Yeah, that’s no-not a problem. Should I get food, will it take a while?”

“If you haven’t had lunch you should do that, it does no one any good for you to get a sugar low because you denied yourself food in your fretting. It’ll be a while for us to start and for the numbing to set in, so go eat.”

Sakura estimated the whole procedure taking about half an hour, but it could go longer or shorter depending on factors. She had never done something like this before. Would the numbing medication work on a mouth set in someone’s hand? Could he feel pain there?

“I need to speak to our dentist. Go eat, take care of yourself,” Sakura urged, holding onto her friend’s arm and giving it a little squeeze. Ino nodded at the contact and followed Sakura’s advice a moment later.

Sakura turned to see Kimimaro coming out of her office with a confused look on his face.

“You get lost?” she teased.

“I suppose it does no good admitting to it now. Have you see the situation for what it is?” he asked,
stepping closer to her.

“I understand what you meant when he said I’d need you. There’s a large gash in the gum of his hand’s mouth. Can you bring your tools over and be prepared in ten minutes?”

“I can do it in seven.”

Sakura nodded. “Good, I’ll start getting him numb.”

She stepped back into her room as the white haired dentist took off for his own office, intent on getting his necessary tools.

“Deidara?” she asked as she stepped into the room. “We’re going to start soon. Does the area feel pain right now?”

The blond nodded. “A little. It was worse when it happened. It’s not as bad now.”

Sakura hummed, filing away that information for later as she sat down to clean the site once more as best she could. Sakura had an oral form of numbing cream she pasted over the wound site, but it would be close to ten minutes before the area became unfeeling.

‘But that’s for a normal mouth.’

“Deidara,” Sakura called. When he looked up at her she continued. “I’m going to prod the area and I need you to tell me how sensitive you are to the touch.”

He nodded and Sakura began to investigate the area. “Can you feel that?”

“Not really. I mean, I see you poking it, but it feels too tingly from your gel to tell.”

The door behind her opened as Kimimaro stepped in, followed by Shizune, holding a small container of supplies that were air tight sealed in bags he would need to rip open for one time use. He was putting his scrubs on after pulling them out of an orange bag. They were wrinkly, but Sakura could smell the clean of them when he stepped closer to her.

Deidara tensed at the proximity, but Sakura put herself between him and Kimimaro. She moved her knee to bump Deidara, reminding him she was there and she wasn’t going to let anything bad happen. It was enough to pacify the blond.

“Has he been numbed?” Kimimaro asked, speaking like a professional to her.

“Just with the gel.”

Kimimaro nodded as he prepared a needle that would keep Deidara numb throughout the stitch up. Sakura moved her head so Deidara didn’t have to watch the needle piece his gum and inject the drug that made all his nerve endings forget what pain was.

“Good,” Sakura whispered, her voice muffled thanks to the face mask.

Kimimaro was wearing a mask over his face as well, but when he looked to her, his jade green eyes were bright and easy to get lost in. He nodded before reaching for his tools. Sakura kept the area prepped with bracers in Deidara’s mouth, but it was Kimimaro who navigated the sensitive landscape of Deidara’s mouth.

For once it wasn’t Sakura who was responsible for the healing in her office, and it was odd feeling. She was both relieved and embarrassed. She wished she could be the person that healed everyone,
but she knew she wasn’t always the most qualified. There would be times where she would need to ask for help and accept it.

“You’re doing great,” Sakura murmured softly.

Deidara made a sound of acknowledgment in his throat and Kimimaro looked up at her, reading to add another stitch to the gash. Sakura didn’t clarify who her encouragement was for. They were both doing well.

She felt a tug at the back of her head and cantered her eyes back to see Deidara’s opposite hand reaching for a stray strand that dangled close to his reach. She didn’t move away when he caught it between his thumb and finger, and she didn’t move away when he began to rub it between his two fingers in affection. It seemed to calm him.

“Almost done.” Kimimaro started to tie up the last stitch and stepped back, depositing his tools on the table pulled up to the bed. “Finished,” he breathed.

Deidara looked up and flexed his fingers a bit. The reaction was slow, and Sakura suspected some of the numbing was responsible for that. Still, the blond glared at the dentist like everything was Kimimaro’s’ fault.

“I’m going to bandage you up,” Sakura interjected, moving back to the site. “Nothing cold and no strenuous activity for the next ten days. You think you can do that?”

Deidara’s attention switched from glaring to soft and attentive. “Yeah, un.”

“Good.”

Sakura started to wrap his hand again, the way it had been when he first came in. This time the bandages were clean and the work was neat. He watched her, ignoring the way Kimimaro slipped out.

“Thanks,” he said after a moment. “I didn’t know what I would have done if you weren’t here as an option.”

Sakura finished wrapping his hand and taped the end down. She smiled at her work and then at him. “Of course. I only wish I could do more, but I’m not that impressive. Ah, but if you get hurt anywhere else or you’re sick you can come back anytime. For now you just have to believe me when I say I’m a little more useful than this.”

“You did more than you know.”

Deidara held his hand to his chest and let it sag a bit. He tried moving it a bit and then let it rest across his waist. His fingers were still stiff to move, but Sakura assured him that was temporary and would wear off in a few hours.

“Is Ino out there?” he asked suddenly.

Sakura tip toed to the door and looked out. The lobby was empty.

“She’s still at lunch I think. You want me to call her? I’m sure she’d rush back for you. She seemed really worried about you when you both first came in.”

Deidara shook his head and then started to pull himself off the operating chair. “No, I don’t want her worrying about me or following me back. She’s too annoying these days and I just want to be left
alone. People can just be so nosy, un. Trees sometimes talk, but they’re easier to get away from than family.”

“Is that the reason I’ve not seen you before in Pompeii? I haven’t been here long, but you weren’t at Founder’s Day, were you?” She tried to think back to all the faces she passed that day. There were a lot, but she was sure she had never seen Deidara before.

“No, I don’t come back into the city so much these days. I-I’m much more suited to keeping to myself. It’s…” he looked away, to the wall, glancing over the health charts, then to the dar sink where metal trays were set up for prep. “It’s a long story. I’m sorry I said this much, but you were just really easy to talk to.”

The last sentence came out with a laugh and even a smile that made Sakura feel a little more at ease. It was great to feel like you helped someone.

“I wish I could do more. If you wanna talk I’m here, if you need patching up I’m here too. If you don’t want Ino tailing you I think I can keep her distracted until then. I’m hoping I’m one of the few people she’d forgive the deception.”

Deidara narrowed his eyes, still grinning. “If you’re the same Sakura from her penpal years I’ll believe it. And don’t think I won’t come back if I need it. It’s nice talking to someone again, someone who’s new. Everyone else here has…”

His words trailed off as he fidgeted with the courage it would take to complete the sentence.

“History?” Sakura offered. Like high school.

“Yeah, that’s a good way of putting it.”

Sakura nodded and Deidara smiled at the way she seemed to understand. She helped him up and finished his paperwork before informing him that her billing expenses would be channeled through Kimimaro, since he did most of the actual work. Deidara let her know that an invoice could be sent to Ino’s father and that would be good enough before he set himself out the back. Shizune had helped Sakura through the last leg of it and confirmed that Ino’s father would be good to his word and take care of the expenses.

“You’re not going to ask?” Shizune called after Sakura.

Sakura paused in the doorway to the room Deidara had just left. There were things that still needed cleaning.

“Maybe one day I will, but right now, I’m much too content with being a person he trusted enough to be helped by.” Sakura let her shoulders sag as she glanced back at the older woman. “I’m here to help, remember?”
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were flowers on her desk.

Sakura blinked, setting her empty lunch container down and looking over at Shizune. “Where did these come from?”

“Seems that you have an admirer,” Shizune said, taking the box Sakura offered her with a word of thanks. “A delivery man brought it by.”

“Huh,” Sakura said, going around to the front of her desk.

She touched the petals of the sunflowers, frowning at the texture. They weren’t real. She lifted the note that accompanied it.

*Thank you for your help! Bang! ~Deidara*

“What?” Sakura said, examining the flowers more closely. They were made of clay and painted. Honestly, the level of detail was quite astounding. “What did he mean by bang?”

There was a sizzling sound. Sakura glanced down at the stems of flowers which were burning away, like a wick.

“Sakura!” Shizune exclaimed, leaping over her desk and knocking Sakura to the ground.

Sakura watched, breathless beneath Shizune’s protective stance, as the flowers ignited in a small shower of fireworks and sparks.

It was gorgeous and fleeting.

It had also been seconds away from burning her face.

“What was that?” Sakura demanded, brushing her hair out of her face.

“I had forgotten that Deidara has a reputation as a pyromancer,” Shizune said, frown severe. It is an intimidating look on her. She surveys the mess left behind, singed papers and black marks all over Sakura’s desk. “And he is something of a prankster. I will need to remind him that such acts are incredibly inappropriate. He could have burnt your face!”

Sakura stood, assisting Shizune to her feet. “Well you have my thanks for the quick acting,” Sakura said.

“I’ll be having words with Deidara,” Shizune said, eyes an unearthly green.

Sakura was extraordinarily relieved that she was not on the end of Shizune’s wrath.

Shizune gave her a brisk hug before turning to the mess with a sigh. “Go ahead and head out early,” she said, “I’ll call the janitor and track down Deidara.”
Sakura did not envy Deidara his position. “Alright,” she said, shutting down her computer and filing away whatever readable papers are left behind. “How are we going to fix these documents? We need them.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Shizune said. “Our janitor possesses some lovely restoration abilities. I’ll put everything away after she comes by.”

“You’re the best Shizune!” Sakura exclaimed, bussing a kiss against her cheek and heading out the front door.

It was time for dinner.

“Here are your sunglasses,” Ino said, pressing a pair of aviators into Sakura’s hands. “Make sure you keep them on at all times, even when you’re in the bathroom or if you step outside.”

“Okay, okay,” Sakura replied, pressing a hand to Ino’s shoulder to show her appreciation. She put the blue reflective lenses on. “How do I look?”

“Absolutely lovely,” Ino said as she perched the cat eye sunglasses on the bridge of her nose. She hooked her hand through the crook of Sakura’s arm and strode down the street. “We’re fabulous.”

Sakura laughed, shaking her head but keeping pace gamely. Being with Ino was always an adventure.

They stopped outside a storefront with the name Mamushi in tasteful, if plain lettering at its front. The windows were wide and showcase a scene of long tables, plush seating and warm lighting. There was an open counter where the chefs’ work with the fish was clearly visible. Against the far wall was a bold mural of two women eating sushi in a traditional Azuchi-Momoyama period Japanese art style.

Sakura whistled, impressed. “Nice place.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty wonderful. Patrons just have to be a bit careful. Better safe than sorry,” Ino said, pressing through the door.

“Sakura, Ino!” Naruto called out, waving them down. The group was seated in a corner. “C’mon over!”

Sakura took a seat between Hinata and Menma, ignorant to Ino’s pout.

“Here,” Hinata said softly, passing her a menu.

“Thanks,” Sakura said, taking a moment to appreciate everyone’s eyewear. “What’s good here?”

“Everything!”

Sakura jumped, turning around in her chair.

A woman stood firmly planted in front of her. Her smile was wide and manic, eyes shaded by dark sunglasses.

Her hair was also made a hundreds of snakes.

The snakes were purple and writhing, hissing and turning to look at their surroundings.
“Anko Mitarashi,” she said, sticking out her hand to shake Sakura’s firmly. “I own this place.” She leaned in, scrutinizing Sakura intently. Then she plucked the menu out of Sakura’s hands. “Don’t worry your pretty little head about choosing! I’ll pick your sushi out for you tonight. You seem like an unagi, girl…”

Sakura watched, dumbfounded, as Anko walked away, whistling cheerily.

“Looks like you’re getting the eel,” Menma crowed, nudging her in the ribcage.

“I like eel,” Sakura said, smiling slightly. “I was just a bit surprised that she figured it out just like that.”

“Anko’s good at her job,” Naruto said. “A bit out there but she makes the best damn sushi around.”

“Maybe because she was around when sushi was invented,” Sasuke muttered, arms crossed.

“Oh hush,” Karin said, pouring herself a cup of sake. “You just don’t like the fact that she tried to feed you like a bird the first time we came here.”

“Karin!” Sasuke exclaimed, cheeks red. “Don’t talk about that!”

Sakura laughed, relaxing as conversations started up around her. She enjoyed this, simply being together and talking and enjoying each other’s company. She didn’t have the benefit of a shared history with those at the table, but sitting with them had started to feel like home almost as much as the actual town of Pompeii. There was a place for her here, and it was warm and welcoming. Maybe she was the newest in town, but she still felt like this was the home she was always meant to make and Sakura loved the feeling.

“Tayuya, have you heard anything about this whole fiasco that Kiri is starting up?” Menma asked in a low tone.

Tayuya frowned, thinking. “Not sure what fiasco you’re talking about. Kiri has fingers in just about every pie in town. You need to be a bit more specific.”

“The...recent incident,” Menma said, skirting around the issue.

“He’s talking about that Orochimaru thing,” Naruto said, breaking into the conversation. He was oblivious to the way Sakura flinched. “Dad’s gotten all up in arms about it but he’s keeping it very hush-hush.”

“Tsunade hasn’t mentioned anything to the coven but I know she’s only recently started to attend some city council meetings,” Tayuya said. “You think that’s what it’s about?”

“The clan heads have been to the meetings too,” Shikamaru said. “Dad is being pretty tight-lipped over the whole thing.”

“Mito-sama is involved too,” Karin said. “Whatever’s happening, it’s pretty serious.”

“Nah,” Naruto said cavalierly. “I think it’s Yagura just blowing hot air. He’s always been a paranoid bastard, especially since Akatsuki came around. Orochimaru died centuries ago; we all know it. Hell, Tsunade said-”

Something cracked behind them.

Everyone turned, taking in the sight of Anko bending over a broken tray. Sushi lay in disarray on the
ground, ruined.

“Apologies,” she said, smile bland. “I just thought of something funny and I forgot my strength. I will be back shortly with your sushi. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

Most of table’s occupants turned back to their conversation, albeit in quieter tones. Sakura, however, continued to watch Anko, catching the fine tremors in her shoulders and the drooping of her snakes.

The sake in her mouth turned to ash.

“I do not feel well,” Sakura said, standing up abruptly. “I’m going to head home and sleep it off.”

She heard the protestations but she bowed out regardless, offering platitudes before heading for the door.

A hand on her shoulder stopped her.

“Don’t approach Anko, not now,” Shikamaru said, gaze steady as he stares her down. “She doesn’t possess the best control.” He looked at her drawn face and tightly pressed lips and sighed. “Troublesome. Look, Naruto may espouse his opinion the loudest but it doesn’t make it true. Talk to Anko another day. Ino and I will come by later with your sushi.”

Sakura nodded, squeezing the hand on her shoulder. “Thank you, Shikamaru.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said, waving her off lazily.

Sakura stepped out onto the street, buoyed by the cool night air. She patted her flushed cheeks, trying to let go of her anger. She didn’t understand the politics of Pompeii, not in full. How could she? She’d been here for a few months while some of the denizens had been here for centuries.

She began to walk, allowing her boiling emotions to fuel her brisk pace.

It wasn’t Naruto’s fault that he didn’t know, that he spoke out so carelessly on issues that he knew nothing of. Sakura had seen the terror in Yagura’s face, the lingering, stifling fear felt through the older residents when the name Orochimaru was invoked. She doubted that Yagura would dare to resurrect the horror of a seemingly forgotten nightmare without good reason.

Sakura huffed and stared down at the pavement, wishing for a way to understand the tenuous climate of Pompeii. She needed knowledge…

Sakura blinked as the concrete beneath her feet turned to pink brick. She looked up, gaping at the building that was in front of her.

It was a building.

In the middle of the street.

Sakura shook her head, unable to understand what she was seeing. She had walked down this street only half an hour ago. What the hell was this building? Sakura scrutinized the sign, which read Sarutobi Library.

Honestly, she wasn’t sure why she was surprised. This was Pompeii after all.

Still a library, right when she needed one.

Sakura walked up the steps, anger dampening as curiosity took over. She pulled out her phone,
turning on its flashlight. She pressed her hand against the oak door, feeling the fine grains of wood beneath her shifting fingertips.

The door swung open beneath her weight.

“Hello?” Sakura called, peeking inside the darkened room. “Anyone there?”

Silence greeted her.

Sakura paused, warring with herself for a moment before valor got the better part of discretion and she stepped inside.

Her footsteps echoed against the marble flooring as she began to explore. She couldn’t quite make out the details of the walls, but it looked intricate, gilt murals and swirling images of legends she knew nothing of. Heavy drapes hung in the path before her. Sakura pulled them away, grinning at the sight.

Books lined every wall as far as the eye could see. Sakura glanced up, turning her flashlight toward the ceiling. She couldn’t even see it, it was so far away.

Sakura stepped further into the library, slightly overwhelmed with all the possibilities. Where should she start?

She shook her head, squaring her shoulders.

She’d just start somewhere.

The starting was the important thing.

She looked around and finally found the light switch. She flipped it on, gasping as the light allowed her to fully appreciate the beauty of the library. The books were gilded in silver and gold and shimmery colors of all sorts, bright and inviting. In the center of the room was plush sofas and plump ottomans and pillows, ready for any reading position. There were innumerable ladders along the walls, positioned in such ways that seemed almost impossible as one ladder connected to another and then another. There were moving staircases alongside the walls, allowing for easy access to the books. The lighting was nouveau in style, thousands of colorful glass shards making up mosaics of pure light.

It was strange and beautiful.

Sakura pulled back her hair, grabbed a conveniently placed basket, and strode toward the closest ladder.

It was time to get to work.

Sakura dodged the flailing tentacle, wobbling precariously on the high ladder as she fought to shut the book. Her shirt was soaked and she smelled of brine, peppermint, and honey, an odd combination to be sure. Sap clung to different portions of her hair, making it stand on end.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had this much fun.

Sakura reshelved 1001 Tomato-Based Remedies for the Apothecary. She wasn’t sure why there was a giant squid inhabiting this particular book, but she decided not to question its culinary tastes.

Instead she pushed against the handy brass rails on the wall, grinning as the ladder swung around the
walls smoothly. She paused as a glint of silver caught her eyes, examining the title:

A Brief History of Preternaturally Inclined Villages.

Sakura couldn’t help a sound of victory as she carefully lifted her evil eye medallion, brushing it against the binding on the side.

There was no reaction.

Just to be safe, Sakura pulled out the ankh given her by a client and tapped the top and bottom of the book. (She had quickly learned to be cautious with books that often had a mind of their own.)

Again, nothing happened.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Sakura tucked her talismen away and gingerly lifted the book. She added it to the basket that hung from one of the rungs of the ladder, appreciating once more just how wonderful this library was. Sakura glanced at her ladened basket, counting fifteen or so books.

With a satisfied nod, Sakura clambered down the ladder with an ease that belied her enthusiasm. She startled and nearly missed a rung when someone began to clap.

“Well done.”

Sakura turned, clinging tightly to the ladder as she surveyed her surroundings. Below her stood an older man, hunched and stooped with age.

Perhaps the librarian?

She swallowed, making her way down the ladder to meet the interloper. As she got closer to him, Sakura could make out his facial features: the craggy planes of his face and his warm, kind eyes.

“That was quite impressive child,” he said as she reached the same level as him. “I’ve never seen a newcomer handle herself so well with the more...rambunctious books. Especially considering that you did not use any magic.”

Sakura smiled wryly. “Well, Pompeii offers a steep learning curve.”

“Indeed it does!” the man said, seeming delighted as he laughed. “I am Hiruzen Sarutobi, librarian.”

“I am Sakura Haruno, new doctor here in Pompeii,” Sakura replied, taking his hand and shaking it firmly. “I apologize for barging in here unannounced.”

“No apologies are necessary!” Hiruzen said. “Truly, I am glad that the library chose to appear to you; it almost never comes to newcomers. Whenever you see the library, know it is open to you at any hour of the day.” He peered into her basket, a frown gracing his face. “What exactly were you looking for?”

“I want to understand the town better,” Sakura said, meeting his troubled gaze easily. “Things are brewing just beneath the calm surface and I am behind many other citizens by centuries. I need to arm myself with knowledge.”

“A wise method,” Hiruzen said. “And what is it specifically you seek knowledge in today?”

Sakura swallowed, remembering the reactions of the younger generation. Would this man brush off her concerns so easily too? She breathed deeply and said, “I want to know who Orochimaru was and his significance to this town.”
“Orochimaru?” Hiruzen said, voice high as he staggered back a step. “Yes...I suppose with the current unrest it would make sense to look into the underbelly of Pompeii. And Orochimaru certainly thrived in the darkness.” He sighed, drawing a shaking hand across his face. “Well, *A Brief History of Preternaturally Inclined Villages* is a good choice to learn about the significance of Pompeii itself but for Orochimaru…” He trailed off.

“Are there truly no books on the events in Pompeii?” Sakura asked.

“Actually, I might have something. Wait here.”

Sakura watched as Hiruzen doddered away, feeling a bit accomplished. It was good to be taken seriously in her concerns.

“Here,” Hiruzen said triumphantly, waving a book above his head. “I found it!”

He pressed a plain book into her hands, looking at her expectantly. She examined the blank cover, looking over the dark stains within the leather. She carefully opened the book, ready to find the title.

It was blank.

Sakura scowled, flipping through the pages. All were blank.

“What is this?” Sakura asked.

“It will reveal itself to you as time goes on,” Hiruzen said. “This should provide you answers on who Orochimaru is and what he has done within this town.”

“But…”

Hiruzen shook his head. “It is late. You should head home.”

Sakura raised her hands in protest but Hiruzen faded away before her very eyes. She frowned at the spot he once was, not appreciating his cryptic advice. She wanted straightforward answers.

She glanced down at the blank book.

Perhaps answers were within it.

“I’m taking this basket of books with me,” Sakura called, guessing that Hiruzen was listening. “Next time I’m here I’ll get a library card, if that is something you have here.”

When she was met with silence, Sakura took it as permission and headed for the door.

She stepped outside, blinking at her surroundings which had changed.

She was in front of the clinic.

Sakura grinned, looking up at the library. She wasn’t sure how sentient a building could be, but this *was* Pompeii. She patted the library sign. “Thank you,” she murmured, before moving forward and pressing a key into her lock.

She frowned as something tugged at the space behind her bellybutton.

Her seal.

Sakura placed the basket of books inside the clinic before locking the door, responding to the call of
the seal.

She sucked in a heavy breath as she landed in the town square, trying to reorient herself quickly. Blue hands landed on her shoulders, steadying her.

“Sakura,” Kisame said, gazing past her with concern.

“Sakura!” Zabuza was suddenly in her face, pushing Kisame out of the way. He paced in front of her, full of energy. “I...he was alone for just a minute... I can’t believe...it’s my fault!”

“Zabuza, what happened?” Sakura demanded, grabbing his face and making him stand still. “I need you to breathe and explain.”

“It’s Haku,” he said, eyes full of tears. Sakura brushed the saline away, listening attentively. “He...he was attacked.”

“Where is he?” Sakura asked tersely.

“Here,” Kisame said, carrying a slight body over to Sakura.

It was Haku, but he was in very poor shape, tensed in agony.

“Here, hold onto me,” Sakura said, offering her arms to Zabuza, Kisame, and Yagura. “I’ll take us back to the clinic.”

“I’ll do it,” Yagura said darkly, eyes glowing.

They landed in the middle of the clinic and Sakura immediately set to work, pulling on gloves as she gave orders. “Yagura, I need you to call Shizune; let her know it’s an emergency. Kisame, place Haku on the examination table. Zabuza, grab a glass of water and sit down!

“Now,” Sakura took a deep breath to center herself, “what happened?” Sakura asked, brushing Haku’s hair away from his face.

“We were going out to the lake,” Zabuza said, gaze unfocused and voice unnaturally calm. He was in shock. “Haku ran up ahead since I had to stop by Hidan’s for some hardware. It couldn’t have been more than ten minutes...I came across him screaming, all contorted...He’s out of it now but he said something bit him.”

Sakura frowned, leaning in to examine Haku’s neck. There were two puncture holes, reminiscent of fangs. The veins around the entry wound were darkened and inflamed.

She frowned. “Kisame, I’m going to need you to call Chiyo and inform her that I will need her assistance. Kankuro’s too. Haku is poisoned.” Zabuza released a wet sounding noise. “Zabuza, you did the right thing. We are getting him treated.” Sakura wrapped a sterile bandage loosely around the wound. “What venomous animals are native to the area?”

“It was Orochimaru,” Yagura said, stepping up beside her.

“Have you seen this sort of attack before?” Sakura asked.

Yagura nodded. “Chiyo has dealt with it in the past.”

“Kisame, please let her know what we are dealing with,” Sakura said. She frowned as Haku began to scream. “We’ll need her expertise to handle this.”
Yagura stood beside Zabuza, hand on his shoulder. “Orochimaru will pay for this, in blood.”

Chapter End Notes

everyone in pompeii is illiterate since the library is an asshole that acts like the room of requirement.
Chapter 23

Chapter by Vesperchan

There was no way she couldn’t feel the magic of the marks on his neck. There was energy there, crackling and alive. Veins of black were growing out of the puncture wounds and spreading away from the site like spider webs. Sakura watched it move and the rate at which it spread was frightening.

She turned her watch over, feeling the tic of every second and measured the spread. She put her brain to work and did the math faster than she ever had in internship. She didn’t know how to counter to toxins but if Chiyo took more than 530 seconds the black lines would be at Haku’s heart. Would she make it in time? How many minutes…?

She had to buy him time, she had to slow down the spread or halt it until Chiyo showed up. What was driving the venom was more than just natural flow. Haku was a merkin, one of the mermaid creatures, his blood didn’t filter so fast. This spread was driven by the curse.

Sakura reached for the magic at his neck, sensing it like a cloud of gas almost. She touched the bite and it was like falling, going into the curse. She stumbled, grappling for purchase in the darkness before it bled away and she was back in the room again. The room was the same but the color was faded to the point of barely being even there and darkness still ate at the edges of her vision.

Sakura saw Zabuza frozen in his seat and then there was Shizune moving in slow motion to where the older man was non responsive. She was moving so slow, like she was caught in a time stream twice removed from hers. Shizune hadn’t see Sakura yet, but Sakura wondered what the woman would have seen if she turned and looked.

Sakura looked back to Haku and saw the darkness around his body. There was a black coil there, wound loosely around his body. It was growing around him, swelling and twisting to wrap itself more securely around Haku’s form. Sakura watched it move, becoming thicker and longer.

It moved like a snake.

“Just like the bite marks,” she gasped.

In a rush she reached for the black coil, pulling it away from Haku’s body. When she freed one coil another took its place. When she loosened one area a different area grew that much tighter. Sakura buried her hands in the mess, looking for the head. It came out hissing.

With a snarl the head reached for her wrist, fangs coming down and bouncing off her skin like it had tried to pierce steel. It writhed, sending a shiver all the way down its body. Pain made it shriek and Sakura noticed Shizune turning towards them in slow motion like she was caught underwater.

Sakura took the chance to grab its neck, feeling her body on fire with some energy that didn’t come from her but clung to her regardless. It tasted of the magic that kept her house safe from trespassers. She grappled with the curse, pulling it up and off of Haku. Someone was calling her name from far off.

The curse was furious with her, trying to snap at her hand and arms again, only to be held back and pressed under her arms. Its tail wrapped around Sakura’s torso and she felt it squeeze, but something kept her safe. It couldn’t hurt her, it couldn’t curse her without a bite. It was useless pulled off Haku and that’s where Sakura planned to keep it until Chiyo could make it there.
Sakura stepped back with the curse, struggling to hold onto it with her own strength. It was strong and angry. It wanted Haku, it wanted to hurt her, it wanted to destroy and be free but Sakura wasn’t about to let that happen. She twisted, falling down to her knees in the corner and then fell onto her side. She hissed in stress as she maneuvered the snake head to her side and pressed it into the floor, bearing down on it with the intention of cutting off its air supply. She didn’t know if a curse needed air, but if it had been a real snake that’s what she would have done.

It was screaming loudly and Sakura didn’t know if anyone else could see it, but the tail was swelling around her, wrapping her torso and neck. She felt it wrap around her mouth to try the same thing and she bit it hard. It writhed that much more, freeing most of her only to go back to her neck in an attempt to strangle her. Somehow the magic around her kept her breathing, but this curse wasn’t weakening either. She’d hold it at bay, but she had no idea what to do with it elsewise.

‘Let go, little girl!’

Sakura didn’t know where the voice came from, because it didn’t seem to come from the curse snake, but she heard it clear enough all on her own.

Sakura felt her arms burn. She wouldn’t last forever but she would be damned if she didn’t last as long as she could.

‘You are not a concern of mine, do not make yourself my enemy, little speck. Let go!’

“As if!” Sakura snarled, bearing down on the snake head with all her strength. She was screaming in her head and feeling the pop and rip of muscle. The fibrous tissue in her body was fraying from the strain. This was going to hurt in the morning.

“Banish!”

The word was booming and Sakura felt a wave of golden energy roll over her and send her tumbling against the back wall. She hit it with a bang but the curse in her arms wasn’t so lucky. It caught the gold magic and burned upon contact, turning red with fire and then gray with ash. It shrieked one last time and then it was no more.

The world rushed back into color and started to move again.

Everything hurt, but Chiyo was in the room along with Shizune and…Tsunade? The room was full of women and the blond one that hated her was walking over. Oh, but Chiyo was doing something to Haku and Shizune was helping. Haku would be fine at this rate. The curse was gone, burned away. The toxins in his body would be countered with the old woman’s knowledge.

Sakura didn’t have to worry anymore.

She tried to move and mentally winced at the strain. It would be worse tomorrow after a rest, but she could feel it now after the wind down of her struggle. That had been a lot for her.

“That was stupid of you. What did you think you were going to do when you’ve no healing magic of your own to boast of?” Tsunade huffed, standing in front of Sakura and crossing her arms. “Not even my apprentice witch could have dispelled such a strong curse on their own.”

“Haku,” Sakura said, rising to her feet. It hurt, but she grabbed the wall for support.

Behind Tsunade Sakura could see that Kankuro and his almost-grandmother were in the room, administering something to Haku while Shizune monitored the boy’s vitals. Zabuza was standing in the doorway, watching what happened to the kid he was in charge of.
From where she stood Sakura could see the dark stains that stood out like black veins beneath Haku’s skin. They hadn’t advanced any further from where they had been when Sakura pulled the curse off of him over five minutes ago. It wasn’t going to reach his heart and the antivenom was in his blood now. She had bought him the time he needed, that was all that mattered.

Tsunade stepped to the side, drawing up even with Sakura. Her arms were still crossed and her expression sour, but she wasn’t glaring at her anymore. Instead, Tsunade’s attention was on Shizune who worked to keep Haku in comfort.

“She’s doing a great job, you don’t have to worry,” Sakura sighed, leaning back against the wall. She could feel there were cracks in it. The wood moved under her shoulder and she winced at the thought of having to repair it. She had hit the wall hard.

Tsunade huffed under her breath. “Of course she is. She’s never done a terrible job in her life. If she believed that much she’d be running you around like a errand girl.”

“If you think that’s all she does here you’re a bit off the mark. Shizune isn’t my errand girl, she’s my treasured senior and partner at the practice. I wouldn’t be doing half as well if it were not for her. I don’t doubt her value at all. She’s far more than an errand girl.”

Tsunade’s stance almost relaxed, but then tensed again at the last second. “Well, you should get used to doing all that on your own because this isn’t a forever gig for her. In another decade or two she’ll come back to me. You’re not so special.”

“No, I’m not. And I think in twenty years I’ll be well on my way.”

With her words spoken, Sakura pushed off the wall and approached the group around Haku’s table. Kankuro saw her approach and stepped to the side to draw up alongside her. He offered her a small smile.

“How is he doing?” Sakura asked, stepping closer to see for herself.

She reached for her stethoscope on the nearby table. She checked his breathing with her wristwatch, peeked at both eyes to check the pupil dilation, and looked at the black veins again. He was stable, that much she could tell. She theorized the antivenom would take a little while to work. For now, he was sleeping soundly.

“He’ll be fine,” Chiyo cackled. “The hard part is done. Venom is wine best cleaned with wine. There will be no lasting damage done to the boy because of that. His curse was the real danger, and now that it’s gone you can all breathe.”

Shizune looked up at Sakura and smiled. “Thank you.” Her eyes lifted to Tsunade. “Both of you. It was a team effort.”

Tsunade glanced sideways at Sakura before dropping her hands to her sides and nodding. “I’m done here then. Call me if you need anything else, Shizune.”

With one final glance backwards at Sakura, the blond woman turned and left the way she came, through the door into the lobby. Sakura heard the footsteps and then the hiss of magic before silence ebbed back into the shared space.

“How did you get the curse off of him?” Chiyo asked, pinching Sakura’s elbow.

Sakura hissed, hating how much her arm hurt from the strain she put it through earlier. Chiyo smirked like she had found out the younger girl. Sakura wanted to glare, but found she couldn’t
when she looked at the crafty old woman.

“What are you talking about?”

“The curse, girlie! How did you get the curse off the brat?”

Sakura rubbed the sore spot on her elbow. “I just pulled it off. Why?” She looked up at those around the room, seeing them all have eyes on her.

It was Kankuro who explained. “You’re not supposed to be able to do that. Or, you could, I mean, it’s possible, but it’s like pulling apart acid or something. Touching a curse should burn.”

“It looked like a snake.”

Chiyo cackled but the sound wasn’t full of mirth like others had been. Her laugh was tight. “Because he’s a snake himself. Of course his curses would look like him. All spellwork looks like the person who casts it. You did well to pull it off the kid while you did. I suspect I might not have made it in time otherwise. He had already been pretty far gone when they brought him in, it seemed.”

“He’ll be okay?”

The room turned to see Zabuza standing a foot away from them, hovering in his own body like a ghost. His eyes didn’t really see them, they were just open and there. But at the mention of Haku’s condition Sakura saw a spark of something. It motivated her to put on a big smile and step forward.

“Of course he’s going to be alright. There’s a counter to the venom in his body now and the curse has been removed and destroyed thanks to Tsunade. Haku’s recovering now, but he’s out of the woods. You did the right thing by sending him here. We’ll keep him overnight for observations, but I think he’ll be able to go home soon.”

“Could I stay here then?” Zabuza asked, looking at Haku and then at Sakura. “I don’t think it’s wise anyone be left on their own, especially ones who have made enemies of that damn snake. Tsunade will be fine with her whole damn coven, but…”

Sakura heard him swallow. “Damn, we really stepped in it this time. Haku shouldn’t have been the target. He was pissed with us.”

While she didn’t understand everything said, Sakura understood where Zabuza was coming from. She heard the anger in his voice and felt his self blame. She reached out, crossing the room to touch his arm until he looked down at her.

“You’re not to blame. This was a terrible situation and we worked together to solve it. Don’t think this is anyone’s fault. I’ll set up a cot for you down here and we’ll let you stay. I’m in the apartment upstairs and the clinic is pretty secure, you’ll find. Haku will be safe with us tonight.”

His expression warmed for her. “Thanks.”

Sakura nodded and went out of the room to grab the other cot and roll it in. She grunted in embarrassment when she found it heavy to push with her less than useful arms. Everything hurt and it was hard to grab and apply pressure to anything she did. She had ripped something in her arms during that fight. How embarrassing.

It was at times like these she felt the weight of her otherness. She wasn’t strong compared to ancient gods and kitsune boys. She damaged easily and healed less so. It didn’t matter that storm gods and tengu alike needed help on occasion, like most all residents of Pompeii. It didn’t matter that Valkyrie
and mountain demons sought out her aid. Sakura was the doctor and in her mind that meant she was supposed to be above needing help. She was the one who helped. But here she was, useless again.

Somewhere in the back of her head she felt Inner starting to pull herself together.

‘What the hell had I been thinking?’ Sakura thought to herself, remembering how she grappled with the curse in the heat of the moment.

She had just been thinking about saving Haku. She hadn’t planned what to do with the curse once she had it. If Tsunade hadn’t shown up when she did, what would have happened to her?

“Hey?” Sakura looked up, eyes wide. Zabuza was in the doorway, looking worried. “You okay in here?”

Sakura blinked and swallowed, thankful for her calm composure in spite of her turbulent thoughts. “Yeah, I’m just having a little trouble moving the cot. I forgot to turn the brakes off.” She laughed to cover up the lightness of her tone.

Zabuza nodded, stepping in to reach for the opposite end of the cot and tug at it. “Don’t worry. You’re probably tired, right?” He glared when she started to shake her head and deny him. “Don’t tell me you’re not. I don’t know what else you did today, and I’m not sure what happened back there in that room with Haku, but you look tired. Let me at least take care of this.” His tone softened. “You’ve done so much-more than enough as our doctor. I could never thank you enough.”

“I didn’t do that much. I was the least useful person there,” Sakura laughed.

“I don’t think so. You’re all important, and it’s like you said…” Zabuza pushed the cot out and paused at the threshold. “You worked together. Haku wouldn’t be alive without Chiyo, yeah, and he might not be alive without Tsunade, yeah, but don’t forget you. He wouldn’t have made it if you didn’t save him that time like Chiyo said you did.”

Sakura rolled her shoulders in an off kilter shrug. “It was no big deal. I just wanted to help.”

Zabuza almost looked like the words were bitter to hear, but his expression cleared up right away, making it hard to tell what he was thinking. “Yeah, that’s you through and through. Of course you would say something like that.”

When Sakura awoke the next morning she wanted to scream into her pillow. It hurt to move.

It was only through pure willpower she managed to pull herself off the couch, she had missed the bed again, and into some new clothes. The best she could manage was a long sleeve dress with deep, reinforced pockets and her only pair of boots.

It was a good effort on her part, she thought to herself as she looked at her reflection in the mirror. If she bothered to tend to her hair and apply some jewelry she might even look date worthy. Funny how the most comfortable clothes could sometimes be so practical.

Sakura came downstairs, tried to make herself some coffee in the break room, but gave up part way through when her arms hurt too much. She let her hands settle in her pockets and hang out there. If she was lucky she wouldn’t have to use them too much. She guessed she’d be sore for another day, two at the most, before she would be back to her old self.
‘You up?’ Shizune asked, stepping in and frowning. ‘It’s early for you.’

‘My coffee maker isn’t as nice as the one down here,’ Sakura admitted with a pout. ‘But I think I’ve changed my mind about coffee. How are Haku and Zabuza?’

‘Still here, still asleep, and still nothing you need to worry about. They’re both fine. In an hour or two they’ll be awake and we can discharge them. Haku even has color back in his pretty pink cheeks!’

Sakura snickered. ‘Don’t let him hear you say that. I think he still has his pride.’

Shizune’s eyes were dangerous and sharp when she grinned. ‘Not after this episode. If he doesn’t bow and kiss the ground you walk on he’ll never be able to call himself a Mizu boy. He owes his life to three women.’

Sakura felt her faked smile falter. ‘I didn’t do that much.’

She was supposed to be the town doctor, she was the one they went to first for help, but in the end she hadn’t been enough or even halfway decent enough to save a single person.

‘Don’t think like that. You don’t know what you did. What I saw yesterday when they brought him in was enough to scare any immortal, but you’re so much younger than I and yet you didn’t hesitate. You thought of Haku first and I never saw you afraid.’

‘Yeah, just stupid. I don’t know what I was thinking.’

The older woman reached for Sakura’s shoulders and held them. ‘You did the right thing, you were brave, and I’m proud of you.’

It was enough to finally make her grin. ‘Thanks.’

Shizune’s smile was warm as she moved her hands down Sakura’s arms to hold the doctor’s elbows in a motherly embrace, but Sakura flinched at the contact and Shizune froze. Eyes suddenly narrowed Shizune prodded at Sakura’s arms and it was after only seconds of investigation that Shizune demanded an honest analysis of Sakura’s condition.

Coming clean resulted in Sakura being relieved of her duties for the day after she checked Haku and Zabuza out. She was prescribed muscle relaxers and instructed to sleep off the strain. When Sakura protested, saying she could still move and work, Shizune refused to hear it and pulled rank.

Sakura was the doctor, but Shizune knew what was best.

So that’s how Sakura ended up back in bed, curled up around one of the library books.

Outside her window, raven and crow sat perched, looking in and watching even more keenly than before.
Chapter 24

Chapter by Jaylene

Sakura’s arms ached as she lifted the ragged book between her hands, brushing fingers over the stained cover. She hadn’t a chance to read any of it in all of the excitement, but she knew this was the book Hiruzen specifically chose for her.

Sakura flipped it open, expectant.

There was nothing at all on the first page.

Sakura frowned slightly, rifling through the pages.

All were blank.

Sakura blinked down at the pristine pages, fresh and crisp in comparison to its exterior.

Was this a joke?

Sakura didn’t think that Hiruzen would play such a cruel prank on her, but she didn’t know him well. Perhaps it was an immortal’s way; capricious and mercurial in the face of unending time. She’d certainly been the brunt of amusement for longer lived beings before; it wasn’t exactly fun.

Still, it didn’t fit what she knew of Hiruzen.

Perhaps there was a trick to the book itself. Did she need a black light? A charm? Some type of pendant?

“What the hell?” Sakura muttered, flipping back and forth among the pages. “What are your secrets?”

A smudge of blue caught her gaze.

Sakura paused, looking down at the page.

The words ‘Wouldn’t you like to know?’ were scrawled across the page in elegant script.

“Yes,” Sakura said. “I would like to know.”

The writing disappeared, to be replaced with: ‘Beware the sounding horn.’

“That’s...not very helpful actually,” Sakura said. “Why be so cryptic?”

‘Get good,’ the book wrote back.

“Memes? Really? Certainly not what I expected in Pompeii,” Sakura said, chuckling despite herself. “How does an inanimate object such as yourself get a hold of the internet?”

‘How does an inanimate object become sentient? I had a decent spellcaster.’

“Huh,” Sakura said, thoughtful, as she leans back into the wall. “I certainly didn’t expect to get schooled by a book in spellwork today.”

‘Isn’t it the way most people learn? Books?’
Sakura snorted, patting the corner of the book. “Smartass.”

‘I’m a book; of course I’m smart. I increase people’s literacy. Honestly, I’m a gift that keeps on giving.’

“Wow, someone’s full of itself,” Sakura said, finding herself more at ease in her skin now than since that debacle with the stairs. Some part of her had been on edge for months now and this whole thing with Orochimaru was the tipping point. There was just nothing left in her now; she was wrung out and exhausted. Something about this book was comforting and calming. She didn’t fear failing it because, well, it was a book.

‘Of course I am; I’m a book. I’m full of pages and knowledge.’

Sakura flipped through a few pages, their emptiness glaring. “Not seeing too much of this so-called knowledge.”

‘Never said I was interested in sharing said knowledge.’

“That’s your purpose as a book!” Sakura exclaimed before pausing and listening. She’d spoken loudly and she didn’t want anyone coming upstairs to check on her. There was no telltale creaking of footsteps against the wooden staircase. She slumped back into the bed, sighing. “Honestly, what’s your purpose if you aren’t sharing knowledge?” Sakura asked in a much calmer voice.

‘Collecting knowledge,’ the book scrawled out. ‘Keeping secrets.’

“What’s your purpose as a book!” Sakura exclaimed before pausing and listening. She’d spoken loudly and she didn’t want anyone coming upstairs to check on her. There was no telltale creaking of footsteps against the wooden staircase. She slumped back into the bed, sighing. “Honestly, what’s your purpose if you aren’t sharing knowledge?” Sakura asked in a much calmer voice.

‘Collecting knowledge,’ the book scrawled out. ‘Keeping secrets.’

“Secrets?” Sakura asked, intrigued despite herself. “Whose secrets do you keep?”

‘Now that would be telling, wouldn’t it?’

Sakura exhaled noisily, glaring down at the curling text. “So is there anything you can tell me?”

‘Ask the right questions.’

Sakura drummed her fingers along the book, thinking. “When were you made?”

‘Millennia ago.’

“Who is your author?” The page stays blank. Sakura thought on it and asked, “Are you older than Pompeii?”

‘...Yes.’

Sakura sat up straight, nerves on end. “Then you would be able to tell me about Orochimaru?”

‘Yes.’

Nothing else followed the word.

Sakura frowned, tempted to pluck at the fraying binding of the book. “Will you tell me anything about Orochimaru?” The book didn’t respond. Sakura growled in frustration, clutching the cover of the book tighter. “Throw me a bone here; I’m going in blind. I just tangled with a nasty curse and I’m not in the mood to deal with an obstinate book.”

‘Find the double of trees. An explanation you will receive.’ This writing looked different, silvery in color instead of blue.
Sakura ran her fingers along the lettering, feeling the raised edges as she contemplated the cryptic instructions. “Are you speaking about the forest?” Sakura felt a shiver down her spine as she thought of foxfire, chimneys, and stairs. She didn’t want to go back into the forest anytime soon.

The pages rustled beneath her fingers and Sakura got the sneaking suspicion that the book had just sighed in exasperation at her.

“Look, I’m a bit new to these instructive riddles, I’m not exactly a sphinx or anything. Nor am I used to the Yoda-speak,” Sakura said, a bit flustered. “I need a little more to go on than just that.”

‘Look, just...go out into the town. Explore a bit. Talk. You’ll find what you need to find.’


‘Kid, you’ve got something looking out for you. Hell, I can feel it and I’m a book. Just...go. You’re in good hands.’

“And I suppose you can’t tell me whose hands I am in, can you?” Sakura said, smile wry.

‘Nope. Thought I will leave you with this: beware the man of many skins. Now go. You have work to do, doctor.’

The book slammed itself shut and Sakura patted the cover in thanks and in contemplation.

Everything ached in that bone-deep, scorched sort of way. She was going to be a mass of bruises on the morrow if she wasn’t already.

With a groan, Sakura levered herself out of bed, arms all but useless. She’d have to cover up to keep from raising any concerns. She struggled to pull her college sweatshirt over her head, panting from the effort. She’d no idea just how much that curse had affected her and she hadn’t even been its target. Sakura shivered, before shaking away the thoughts. She was fine.

She was fine.

(So what if she would wake screaming from flashbacks for the next week, despite her dreamcatcher? Dreamcatchers could prevent magical interference but this? This wasn’t magic. It was normal. Hell there was even a label for it: acute stress disorder.)

Sakura yanked on her jeans more roughly than she really should have, angry at her own weakness. Why was she letting one little curse affect her so much? Shizune’d been fine. Tsunade was fine. Hell, Chiyo was just fine. Why was she the only one so incapable of overcoming something so small.

(She knew why, she just didn’t want to admit it. She was weak. Useless.)

Something thumped her hard in the back of the head.

“Ow!” she said, rubbing at the spot and turning around. Before her floated the book, open from smacking her. “What was that for?”

‘You were thinking too much,’ the book wrote back imperiously. ‘Let’s go.’

“Wait, you’re coming with me?” Sakura asked incredulously.

‘Of course I’m going with you,’ the book said. ‘It’s obvious you’d be lost without me. You need me.’

Sakura laughed, shaking her head. Great. Even a book realized how inadequate she was. She didn’t deserve to be a doctor. She didn’t deserve to live in Pompeii. She was a fraud. She was-
“Stop that!” Sakura exclaimed, covering her head as the book slapped her again with its cover.

The book floated in front of her, almost bristling with anger. *No, you* stop that! *Stop going to that dark place. You’ve made it this far, have you not? Quit doubting yourself.*

Sakura chuckled, batting the book away from her face. “Getting schooled by a book again. Great.”

‘C’mon,’ the book said, circling around her. ‘Let’s go already.’

“Okay, okay,” Sakura said. “Would you like to continue flying about or would you rather me carry you?”

‘Better to carry me. Don’t want to draw any unnecessary attention.’

Sakura offered her hands up to the book, taking it as it landed gently. She headed for the door, making her way down the stairs as quietly as possible, avoiding those places that creaked. She could hear the soft murmur of conversation coming from the clinic as she crept past its door.

Sakura pushed through the outer door, making her way out into the parking lot lit with the fiery colors of sunset.

She set off toward the town square, thinking of the woven tree. Perhaps that was what the book was speaking of. Maybe she was supposed to enter one of the portals.

It was dusk, that opportune moment of the supernatural with the blood red sun and twisting, long shadows. Sakura inhaled the thickening spark of magic, tasting stardust and iron. She picked up speed, moving with a briskness that belied her soreness.

She arrived at the square, somewhat disappointed to find no one else present. She approached the ash trees, eyeing the negative spaces among the branches. Which one should she use?

Sakura reached out, fingertips brushing against one of the portals. Her skin fizzled with the sparks and she felt something familiar tug at her gut.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Sakura yanked her hand away, turning. The man who stood before her was calculatingly average, with brown hair and dark eyes. He was handsome in a casual, almost forgettable sort of way, features pleasing but ultimately unremarkable. Sakura felt herself standing up straighter, oddly aware of this man.

“Why not?” Sakura asked.

“You need a tether to make it through safely,” the man said, leaning against one of the trunks. “The portals are highly volatile otherwise. You might find yourself spread across all eight continents.”

Sakura furrowed her brow. “There’s seven.”

“I know what I said,” he replied, a slight smile flirting across his lips.

“I’m Sakura Haruno,” Sakura said.

“I know.” His eyes were strangely bright as he stared at her. “I am Yamato.”

“Nice to meet you,” Sakura said, offering her hand to him. He took it tentatively, callouses obvious even in his loose grip. She forced her arm to move as normal and braced for the sting when he
shook. She was still sore but she wasn’t about to let anyone else know that.

“What brings you out at this hour?” he asked. “Magic is in rare form this time of day.”

“Needed to get out,” Sakura said. “Had a nagging voice telling me I needed to be here.” Technically all true.

“Really,” he said, fascinated. “I find my experience much the same.”

They stood in an awkward silence for a bit, Sakura unsure what she should say. She had a suspicion that this man was in some way tied to the book’s cryptic clues, though she had no idea how. Yamato seemed comfortable with the silence, used to it. Sakura was exhausted, bone-dry empty and she found herself enjoying the quiet. However, her curiosity and sense of duty got the best of her.

Finally, Sakura said, “I’m afraid I haven’t seen you before, not even in passing. Do you live nearby?”

Yamato twitched and, for a moment, Sakura feared she’d offended him. Then he shook his head, smiling slightly. It was not a nice smile, tinged in bitterness and dripping in frustration. “Yeah you wouldn’t have. I’m kept busy. Besides, I make Hash-certain residents uncomfortable with my presence.”

Sakura furrowed her brow, catching the way he cut himself off. She was pretty certain he meant “Hashirama,” but why? She shrugged off that particular thought, tucking it away to be revisited later as she looked up at the unhappy man.

“Who cares what they think?” Sakura said, resisting the urge to pat his arm. She was oblivious to the way he gaped at her. “There are many people here in Pompeii who are...different, sometimes downright dangerous.” Sakura thought of Zetsu, Yagura, Anko, Pein, Kakuzu, Tobirama, Madara... “Actually, most are dangerous,” she said, the list still spilling out in her mind. “That’s the beauty of Pompeii: acceptance. So what if a few people are uncomfortable at first? There’s many people here who didn’t like me-still don’t like me! That’s a part of life.” Sakura ended her impromptu speech with a firm nod, eyes imploring Yamato to understand.

He was stock still, so still that Sakura wondered if he was breathing or if he even needed to respirate. He looked as if he were a carved statue.

“Yamato,” Sakura said tentatively.

He startled, refocusing his gaze on her. “Sorry about that,” he said, chagrined. “It’s just...I needed to hear that. Thank you.”

“No problem,” Sakura replied, patting his hand. She was startled to find it hard, solid. She hadn’t noticed earlier when they shook hands. Something reverberated through the hand and Sakura found herself reminded of wood.

*Wood...*

*Tree...*

*Find the double of trees...*

Who was it Yamato made uncomfortable? Hashirama?

Sakura gasped, eyes wide as pieces began to fit together in her mind. She still wasn’t entirely sure of
Yamato’s relationship with Hashirama, but she was sure this was exactly where the book was pointing her. She grasped Yamato’s hand more firmly between both of hers, ignoring the way he blushed. She looked up at him, eyes glittering with interest. “You and I need to talk.”

“About what?” he asked, unconsciously leaning into her touch.

Sakura took a deep breath, getting the feeling this wouldn’t be taken well. Still, she had to take the leap. “What do you know of Orochimaru?”

His dark eyes went wide and Sakura saw fear and fury there, swelling like war drums on the horizon. He yanked himself free of her and for a moment fear pulsed through Sakura’s veins, acrid and potent as it paralyzed her. Just as quickly the lightning in his eyes settled and fizzled out, replaced with resignation. “How?” he muttered.

“I…” Sakura swallowed, not wanting to reveal that the source was the seemingly innocuous book in her lap. “Would you like to sit?” she asked. “We could go to the park, it’s not too far…”

“No need,” he said.

With a flick of his fingers, too fast for Sakura’s eyes to follow, a nearby tree warped itself into a chair, without damaging the integrity of the tree itself. The chair was postmodern in looks, sleek and sophisticated. It favored style over functionality though Sakura found it quite comfortable when she hesitantly took a seat.

Appearances were deceiving.

“So how did you find out about me?” Yamato asked, rubbing a hand over his face. “They try to keep this shit quiet.”

“ ‘They?’” Sakura asked.

“The higher ups.” Yamato made a frustrated gesture, a flicking of splayed fingers. “Y’know, the mayor, the Kiri leader, the Akatsuki leader, Hash-” He cut himself off looking vaguely ill.

“Hashirama,” Sakura prompted, trying to keep her voice soft and soothing. His agitated movements seemed to be working their way up to a panic attack.

Yamato deflated at that, wind knocked from his sails, rudderless. “Yeah. Hashirama.”

There was a wistful longing in his voice that accompanied the mourning. Sakura couldn’t help but be intrigued. “Who is Hashirama to you?”

Yamato snorted. “The real question is who am I to Hashirama.” He gazed off into the distance, heedless of the falling night and the awakening of the stars. “You see…Orochimaru is…was…always will be a monster. He sought immortality at all costs. He sought immortality at all costs. He sought immortality at all costs.” His voice dropped low to hide the way it shook. “All costs. He began to experiment on himself, attempting to extend his own lifespan, which is considerably shorter than that of his friends. Then he started to…experiment on others, all in the name of benefitting society. The upper echelons of Pompeii allowed it.” He sneered, “-thought it was acceptable because it could benefit them, potentially grant them longer lives.”

“But something changed,” Sakura said, trying to suss through the inundation of information.

“Yeah.”

“What?” Sakura asked.
“I came along. Spooked the higher ups, especially Hashirama. They chased Orochimaru out of here, called him ‘unnatural’ and ‘vile’ and left his mess to be sorted out on its own.” He shook his head, gaze focused up above on the stars. “If he’s ‘unnatural’ and ‘vile,’ what does that make his creations?”

Sakura didn’t know how to respond. “He...he created something?”

Yamato laughed, a high, bitter noise. He turned to her and his dark eyes seemed to glow beneath the light of the stars and crescent moon. “He created me. I’m the result of his experiment with Hashirama’s DNA.”

_The double of trees._

Sakura had figured out one of the riddles. She should have felt triumphant, accomplished. Instead she swallowed back the taste of bile and copper as she sat in silence with Yamato, offering her presence as paltry comfort for his horrific reality.

Together they watched the stars rise and for the moment it was enough.
Urgency was different in Pompeii. Sakura used to think of urgency like a held breath. She could only hold in her urgency for so long before she had to act on it, like some sort of rodent in a pond of water. Pompeii wasn’t like that. Pompeii held its urgency like a whale holds its breath. The panic and mummers of a snake-man made near immortal sent shockwaves through the community, but Pompeii endured in its habits, in its rituals, in its nuances. Pompeii held its breath long enough for Sakura to almost forget about the threats.

Almost.

“More allergies,” Sakura sighed, watching the tiny buds on the trees outside.

It was still chilly, and it would be a bit longer before anyone shed their jackets, but the flora and fauna in Pompeii was hearty, with breeds that enjoyed coming out early to torment those with sensitive immune systems. The landscape was changing yet again and she felt left behind. Hadn’t it just been the Yule tide? Hadn’t she just welcomed winter? It wasn’t even technically spring yet, but stuff was blooming.

“Ah, yes, but at least this is something easy for us to help with. People forget the simple things and come in thinking their head is going to roll off their shoulders. I would rather tell them it’s allergies than something worse,” Shizune chuckled, organizing the papers at her desk.

She looked more cheery than usual and Sakura was beginning to wonder if that was because the older woman could tell Sakura was unnerved by the things she didn’t understand. Sakura knew enough to worry, but not enough to know when to stop worrying.

When Sakura had tried asking around she had been treated little better than a child. She had been praised for her caring heart, cheered for her willingness to help others, pat on her head and turned around with a cup of milk and cookie for bed. Well, that last part was more figurative than literal. The head pats were literal but only a few people had actually given her food when ushering her along. Though, she didn’t mind the food.

“It’s brought in a few new faces, I’ll say that much.” Sakura sighed. “But I guess you are right. I like that I’m able to help in something around here. I should have a better attitude about things, like you.”

Shizune blushed the way mothers blush when being bragged about. “Sakura, you do an amazing job here. You help people every day.”

“Yeah, thanks. Hey, what does the rest of the day look like. I thought I saw we had a few cancellations but we’ve seen a good two dozen today.”

“That’s what happens when the broods come in. I swear some of these families populate like bunnies. Here it is, our list of appointments for the day…..” Shizune ran her finger down her handwritten list. “That’s funny. You were right about all the cancellations. They’re today at the end. You’ve got one more patient coming in but after her you’re free to run back to your room for reading or whatever it is you do on your own.”

Sakura panicked internally and snickered on the outside, doing her best to stay cool. “No, it’s totally porn Shizune. What else could it be?”
“Obviously,” Shizune laughed along. Shizune’s chuckle doubled after she thought about it, glancing at Sakura’s face and then shaking her head, like the thought was too hard to imagine.

“What’s last on my list for today?” Sakura sighed, reaching for the list herself when it seemed Shizune would be lost in her fit of giggles for a moment more.

“Oh, I shouldn’t laugh so much, I told myself I would warn you about this next one. She’s a friend of mine and Tsunade. She’s…a bit eccentric and the Mizu boys all know to be weary of her. She’s sort of the shadow king to their faction, but is very hands off about things. Mei likes to stay out of politics and just generally leave society to itself.”

Sakura raised a single brow before reaching for the file and flipping through. She saw a few pages of barely any notes. Mei was older, but hadn’t been in more than maybe twice in all her time in Pompeii.

“She’s not a mermaid…it says she’s a…” When Sakura looked up she saw Shizune wincing and Sakura screwed her lips shut. “Sorry, I know, sorry, won’t say that stuff out loud.”

It was still rude for even doctors to mention the classification of certain citizens of Pompeii and Mei was one of them. Sakura thought it might wear off in time after she had been in Pompeii for a while, but it never did. Apparently, when someone shared that with you it was a sign of either deep respect of affection. Some used it as a flirting tactic, others guarded themselves strictly even when their classification was more obvious than others.

Sakura returned her eyes to the notes to try and figure out the rest on her own. It said Mei was a type of Cecaelia related to the Blue Ringed breed found in the waters around Australia. If Sakura remembered correctly the Blue Ringed was a type of Octopus.

The door chimed and a tall woman with long red hair sauntered in, looking as healthy as a spring breeze. Her heels clicked light across the floor and stopped in front of Shizune. Hands on her hips the new woman scanned the room before speaking. “Where’s the pretty new doctor that’s made such a riot in my waters?”

Sakura stood up from behind her desk and came out so that Mei could see her. “Mei Terumi?” Sakura asked, extending a hand to shake. “I’m Doctor Haruno, it’s nice to finally meet.”

Mei’s eyes were brilliant in a shade of aqua green as she reached out a hand to meet Sakura’s shake, but instead of the typical shake she tugged Sakura closer and clasped Sakura’s hand in both of hers. “No, the pleasure is all mine,” she cooed, eyes still dancing. “I’ve been looking forward to when I would finally be courageous enough to make it here. Oh, you are such a cute little thing. I’m sorry it took me so long. You must have been horribly harassed by the men here in Pompeii. I can’t imagine how they’d ever leave you alone.” She tugged Sakura’s hands up to her chest and pat them there. “We girls need to stick together sometimes, don’t you think?”

Sakura smiled, more amused by Shizune’s gesturing hand motions in the background than Mei’s words. “Of course. You said you wanted a physical with us. Why don’t I show you to your room so you can get comfortable while I get your things.”


Sakura smiled and nodded, leading the woman away. Before she rounded the last corner she cast a final look over her shoulder at Shizune who was giving Sakura a big thumb’s up and mouthing ‘good luck.’
After the check up Sakura was glad she had the rest of the day cleared. She went up to her room to change out of her day clothes into something more casual and flipped open the book of sass to see if it would talk to her today. Some days it did, some days it only showed her pointless chatter, and other days it was as silent as a dead thing.

Today was one of those days.

She quickly realized after starting to get her things together for tea that she was missing her favorite mug. It was downstairs in the work room where she had left it after washing it. She toed into her ballet flats and made her way back downstairs with the intention of picking up her mug and leaving, but paused when she saw Shizune shuffling through some papers and looking lost.

“Shizune?” Sakura asked. “Something wrong?”

Shizune looked up and smiled. “No, I’m just having trouble entering some data on this computer and I need to do it all before going to the bank which closes in an hour.”

“Do you want me to do the data entry for you? It’s easy enough for me to figure out.” Sakura edged over and saw what Shizune was working on. It was simple input and Sakura knew she could have it done in twenty minutes, maybe twenty five if the computer loaded like a slow beast.

“No thank you dear. If you do it for me again I’ll never learn. I think I can do it, I just need the time. Oh! But there is something you could help me with.” Shizune reached for the money pouch with all the checks and ‘odd’ forms of payment that needed to be cashed at the end of the week. “Will you take this down to the Hyuga bank? I know it’s a few days early but we’ve been so busy it’s extra full and it’s making me nervous.”

“That’s easy enough,” Sakura chuckled. “Let me get my purse and I’ll be out soon. If you’re still on this when I come back I’ll help you out, but I think you have got the hang of it.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah, you’ve come a long way since day one.”

“Oh, that’s one of the nicest things anyone’s ever said about my work skills,” Shizune cheered, honestly moved by the praise on something she was struggling with.

Sakura skipped back upstairs to get her purse and stepped out of her flats and into some boots. It was still a little cold outside which meant she needed to layer up some more. Sakura paired her jeans with a nicer sweater, this one without stains, and pulled down a green army jacket to wear over her sweater. If it rained she would be fine.

Sakura paused at the thought of rain. She hadn’t seen Pein in a while. He’d been gone, off on business with some of the other ‘important’ members of Pompeii society. Yesterday Sakura had visited his favorite diner for an order of waffles and hung out extra long in hopes of catching him. Konan ended up teasing Sakura about it and promised she would tell Pein to stop being so busy he couldn’t stop by and say hi.

But it wasn’t just Pein. The crows and ravens stayed ever present outside her window, but she hadn’t seen a single Uchiha on the streets. When she went to the mountain to visit Izuna for his monthly treatment his home had been empty. It was only when she was leaving did she see Madara, and he pouted terribly when she asked about the other Uchiha.
Pompeii was different.

Sakura locked the doors behind her and kept the money bag safe in her purse as she walked the rest of the way to the bank. She made it in less than eight minutes of quick leg work and found it mostly empty. A mousy white eyed woman approached Sakura and asked if there was anything she could do to help.

Withdrawing the money bag from her purse Sakura handled it carefully. “I need this currency exchanged and deposited in our account. Who could I see for this service?”

“I’ll be handling the doctor’s finances,” a new voice cut in. The younger Hyuga woman nodded and backed away before returning to her work.

Sakura turned and saw behind her a vague but familiar sight. “You’re Neji…we’ve met before. Hinata’s cousin, correct?”

He was taller than her with a curtain of perfectly treated coffee colored hair that reached the middle of his back. It was tied back in a braid that helped show off the clear white color of his moon colored eyes. Neji nodded to her and gestured to an office off to the side.

“You are not mistaken, doctor. We have met before and I know of you well enough.”

“You’re a very informed man, sir,” Sakura tried to chuckle. She felt odd, almost as if she were speaking to marble. His face was without flaw, his posture was perfect, and even the fabric of his suit seemed immaculate. He was too pretty for a boy and Sakura thought of how Haku might feel if he were to be left in a room with another boy so pretty. Would he be envious?

“This way please.” Neji held open the door to his office and let her take a seat inside before closing the door behind them and sitting down behind a desk.

She noticed on the wall behind him was a calendar for phases of the moon and below that a small table with perfectly arranged quartz crystals, silver coins, and sparkling white chains and jewels. It looked like a small dragon’s hoard.

Neji coughed once, positioning himself between her and the pile. “You have mixed currency to exchange?”

“Yeah, Shizune says this is the best place to go for that sort of thing.”

Neji lightly huffed, reaching for the money bag as she passed it to him. “We are the only bank worth mentioning. The Hyuga family has been managing the finances of this town for as long as banks served a purpose. Such knowledge is common. You would do well to learn this.”

Sakura felt a tick above her brow and forced a smile. “Sure,” she said, wincing at how hard it was to stay civil with the man across from her. He was cold and stiff. Did he know he was being rude and not care, or was he really that dense?

“Um, thanks for doing this, by the way. It’s awfully nice of you.”

“This is my job.”

“Y-yeah, but still, I appreciate it.”

“Hmm. I will now assess the contents of your purse. Please, do not disturb me during this process if you wish for the utmost in accuracy.”
Neji unzipped the pouch and removed the assortment of items. Much of it was money Sakura recognized, but some of it was odd paper and there were even pieces that didn’t look like money at all. Neji sorted through all of it with fine, pale fingers that worked more like wires, manipulating the items seamlessly in a rhythm that reminded her of puppeteers. A moment later he had his piles.

He read off the amount each pile was worth and listed the name for its brand of currency. There was a stack of what looked like leaves, but when turned over shimmered like brass. Those were called LeeBrans or Leaf Brands, and were worth a different amount depending on the number of points and color of the leaf. Neji had them all memorized and worked quickly to calculate their worth.

Neji was so focused on the work in front of it it gave Sakura a free moment to think and watch him without feeling nervous about it. Usually she would want to look away after staring too long in fear of being caught looking, but Neji was distracted and she was curious.

Most of the people in Pompeii had the otherworldliness feeling to them, and Neji was no exception but he was different. He was so easily not human. Sakura didn’t know what he was, and wasn’t going to ask, but he was too perfect, too neat, too pretty, and too articulate with his hands to be something as trivial as human. And even if he had been rude, Sakura wasn’t blind. Neji was nice to look at.

Too bad he was sort of a jerk.

“The total monetary value in common currency is listed here on this slip,” Neji said, printing something out and placing it in front of Sakura.

He circled a number and Sakura grinned. It had been a good week, after all.

“I’d like to deposit it into our account, please.”

“Any withdraws today?”

Sakura shook her head. “None.”

She had loans to pay off, but she had to wait until pay day to tidy that monthly expense up. She’d be paying off her loans for the next few years, but at this rate she would still be able to live comfortably. It was such a nice change from before.

Someone outside the office caught Sakura’s attention and she turned, expecting to see Hinata, but it was only another Hyuga who looked similar.

“Something wrong?” Neji asked, frowning at her divided attention.

“No, I just thought I saw your cousin Hinata, but I was mistaken.”

Neji’s glower was instant and Sakura had to blink to make sure she didn’t imagine it. A second later he blushed and looked away. He distracted himself by coughing into his hand and tugging the front of his suit down. “No, the lady Hinata would not lower herself to come here where the actual work is done. You are mistaken. I have made the deposit and here is your receipt. Are you satisfied with your service?”

“Oh, yeah, thank you.”

She started to stand and he watched her before moving to stand himself. “Than if everything is agreeable and you have no issues with the service here might I suggest you deposit your money with me personally next time your office needs to bank. It would not be a waste of your time.”
‘And have to sit awkwardly across a desk with someone stuck with a stick so far up? Who would want that?’ The thought made Sakura feel a little guilty. Neji wasn’t the most social or tactful, but he wasn’t terrible. Maybe she just needed to give him another chance.

“Sure thing, Neji. You’re the expert. I’ll see you next time.”

“Yes, I am.”

Sakura felt awkward, not knowing how to respond, so she just sort of waved and walked out on her own, stopping at the top of the stairs when she noticed the rain all around her, but not on her. Sakura looked up in the sky and smiled at the hole cut out to keep her dry. Pein must have gotten the message about missing her at his diner. She liked to think this was his way of making up for it.

The rain came down but it was more like a light mist. Some of it splashed her, but she kept her hood up and was more dry than wet as she walked home. She didn’t have far to go but she took her time, and made sure she was aware of her surroundings on the way back.

It was because she was looking that she saw it. Sakura stopped and turned towards the space between two buildings, seeing a shadowed figure standing stiffly in place, face turned three quarters away. She thought she recognized him, but approached anyway to be sure.

“How’s it going, Sai?”

He didn’t respond. The rain kept coming down on him but he didn’t move. His black clothes were soaked and clung to him. He had to be cold. Sakura was in twice as many layers and she was still chilled, even though she wasn’t even wet. She cursed when she reached him, seeing how pale his skin was. He had always been pale, but this was the next level of white. She touched his face and hissed. He was like ice.

“You’re going to get sick like this, honey,” Sakura chided, taking him by the shoulder and pulling him. “What are you doing out here?”

Sai didn’t respond, he didn’t even look at her as he continued to stand there in the rain. Sakura had to draw closer to him. There was no rain falling down on him when she stood beside him, so she stayed close, pulling him closer to her. She called his name a few more times and waited but he never reacted. He was still breathing and she felt the pulse of life through his veins on his neck, but Sai was mentally checked out.

“Come here you poor thing,” Sakura sighed, dragging him with her.

He came almost unwillingly, but that was because he was stiff to move and needed to be pushed and pulled all the way back to her building. Shizune was gone but Sakura led Sai into one of the exam rooms downstairs and began to pull off his wet things. She brought dry towels and then comforters and blankets.

“What happened to you?” Sakura asked again after he had been mostly dried. He didn’t react once during the whole time she had been trying to help him. He blinked maybe once, but he seemed mentally checked out and devoid of emotion more so than usual.

Nearly an hour of her watching over him passed. Sakura left him on his own a few times, but always came back. Sometimes she came back with warm tea for him to sip, or a hot bagel for him to chew on. He didn’t respond to either, but did curl up in the blankets she brought down. Sakura combed back his hair as he stared blankly across the room, waiting for him to say something.

It was dark and the room was only dimly lit when Sakura heard the first thing of the night out of Sai.
“Please, not more. You said we would be the last.”

Sakura rushed to his side, hoping to see a reaction or something new on his face, but it was as blank as ever. “Sai? Sai, who are you talking about. What’s supposed to be the last? Can you talk to me please.”

A moment later Sai opened his mouth and showed off the tattoo there before closing it and his eyes and going to sleep. Sakura let him, but stayed close by in the next room over, unsettled by what she had heard and saw. She was unwilling to leave him alone but gave him his space.

Sai had been traumatized by something and it wasn’t over, by the sounds of it.
Sakura stared at the near catatonic man on her couch. Since showing her his tongue, as if that explained everything, he’d remained silent, gazing off into the distance with unfocused, glassy eyes. She’d left him there, giving him space, but the hour was drawing to a close and Sakura was starting to feel concerned.

“Sai,” she said, trying to bring him out of his daze.

He didn’t even blink.

“Sai!” she said a bit more forcefully.

He shivered, distant but miserable in the cold.

That was what decided it for Sakura as she gently took his hands in her own. He didn’t respond and Sakura could almost feel the ice running in his veins. She’d no idea how long he was outside, but it had been far too long.

“Sai,” she said in a firm tone. It was the voice she used to control unruly patients or speak with those who looked down upon her. It wasn’t exactly a kind tone, but it was effective. “Sai, stand up.”

Sai stood as she pulled him, following her lead of gentle touches and strong voice. She pressed him into the bathroom, turning on the shower. Sakura tested the water, waiting until it was lukewarm before turning and assessing Sai’s state.

He was still completely unresponsive and she worried to leave him alone.

Sakura chewed at her lip, weighing her options.

Sakura stared down at him for a moment, heart in her throat. She turned abruptly, heading to her balcony. Sakura threw it open, ignoring the rain and the way the dark birds scattered with cries of dismay, and leaned over across her balcony to knock on Kimimaro’s window.

She waited for a moment, banging on it again until Kimimaro came stumbling out of the kitchen, dressed in silk pajamas. He looked around wildly, hair unkempt before settling on Sakura. He blinked, before hurrying to the sliding door.

“Sakura? You’re soaking wet! What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Sakura said. “I have a...friend over tonight. Just...wanted you to know.”

He furrowed his brows, green eyes lighten with understanding. “Are you...alright?”

Are you safe?

Sakura thought about it for a long moment, remembering how unresponsive Sai was. “It’s fine,” she said, shaking her head. “I just...needed someone to know.”

She turned to go back inside, only to stop as Kimimaro wrapped a hand around her wrist. Sakura paused, looking up into his inscrutable expression. “Yes?”
“Sakura...stay safe. Not everyone in Pompeii can be trusted,” Kimimaro said, rain soaking through his pajamas, making them translucent against his skin.

“I know,” Sakura replied, pulling out his warm grasp. Her thoughts flew to a snake eating itself, dancing faux foxfire, whispers among the trees, and secrets wormed in deep beneath the soil of Pompeii. “Trust me, I know.”

She left him there, on the balcony and returned to Sai. He was where she left him, eyes glazed over even with the running water behind him.

Finally, with a sigh, she rolled up her sleeves and tugged Sai with her to the shower. As gently as she could, Sakura moved him beneath the spray of the showerhead, watching him for signs of life. His eyelids flickered before closing, a deep sigh rattling out of his chest.

He was still far too cold so Sakura grabbed a washcloth and began methodically rubbing over his fingers before moving to his feet. Along the way, she slowly increased the heat of the water until it steamed. Sai’s translucent skin was flushed a deep, healthy red when Sakura turned off the tap.

Sakura ignored the way her clothes clung to her skin as she directed Sai out of the shower. She didn’t pay attention to the trail of water on her tiled floor as she made Sai take a seat on the toilet. She glanced into the cabinet, pulling out two towels. One she left to the side as she tilted Sai’s head forward and began tousling his hair. The thin veins beneath his skin were clear in his neck, a shimmery silver in color. She stared down at his back, wondering what had happened to him.

Sakura felt him stiffen beneath her touch and she pulled away, allowing him to sit up straight. He regarded her warily, eyes trained on her.

Sakura sighed in relief, leaning back against the counter. “Good to see you’re back,” she said. She grabbed the extra towel and tossed it his way. “Take off your clothes and dry off. I’ll get you something else to wear.” Sai was watching her with a perplexed look as she pulled something off a hook. “Wear this for now,” she said, passing him the robe. Sakura felt a bit embarrassed as she looked at the fabric, dogs playing poker against a searingly green background. Ami had given it to her as a gag gift for Christmas one year and, to her surprise and shy chagrin, Sakura kept it. After all, it was Ami’s first haphazard attempt at sewing. Now, Sai was going to wear it. “I’ll grab a t-shirt and sweatpants for you.”

Sakura bustled out of the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. She couldn’t help but wonder if she’d done the right thing, bringing Sai here. He clearly wasn’t in a good head space. And that whole tongue tattoo…

Sakura paused in her thoughts before scurrying into her bedroom. She lifted the book, stroking her fingers over its spine. The book fell open and asked in bright ink, *What’s up?*

“What can you tell me about tongue tattoos?”

*Bad idea. Fade in about a year and you can’t taste shit for a while after eating...Not that I’d really know. Hell, go for it!*

“What?” Sakura shook her head. “Terrible advice aside, that is not what I was talking about. I...I saw a tattoo on someone’s tongue. It was...I don’t know, a bunch of dark lines, some segmented and some not.”

*what.*

“What does it mean?”
Sakura’s brow furrowed; the book always used correct punctuation. “Yeah, he’s in the bathroom—”

get him to leave NOW.

The absolute rage in the lettering made Sakura jump. “What the hell?” she whispered, glancing toward her bathroom door. “What’s your problem?”

Not safe. Whispers. Spider. The trees have eyes.

“Stop,” Sakura said, heartbeat speeding up in her anxiety. “Sai has been nothing but...well, pretty cryptic but he’s done nothing to earn your enmity.”

Sakura you don’t understand! He’s bad news-

“Haruno,” Sai called, almost tentative.

Sakura closed the book, shaking her head. “Coming!” she said before turning her gaze back to the book. “I’ll deal with you later.”

Sakura tossed the book down and headed back into the living room. She had to fight her instinct to laugh at the sight that greeted her. Sai stood calmly in her living room, swamped in her hideous robe. Ami hadn’t done the best job with the proportions. Sai’s pale knees peeked out beneath the robe. As unbecoming as the garment was, Sai seemed completely unaffected.

“Let me grab you those clothes,” Sakura said, remembering her initial goal.

“This is fine.”

They stood there for a moment in silence as Sakura searched for something to say.

“Why were you sitting out in the rain?” Sakura asked.

He shrugged, not quite meeting her gaze.

“Didn’t you have somewhere to go?” A blank look greeted her. “You know, a house, your home?”

“Home?” He blinked and Sakura had the sinking suspicion that he was suppressing a flinch. “I have no home.”

“Where do you live?”

“Nowhere. Everywhere.”

And thus continued his (and everyone else’s) habit of cryptic evasiveness.

“So you’re homeless?” Sakura clarified.

His nod was minute, but it was still there.

“Stay here,” Sakura said, before she could talk herself out of it. She didn’t know Sai, not really, aside from his abrasive and socially inept attitude. But she knew he was wounded, hurt in a way that festered and rooted itself deep beneath his skin. She couldn’t just stand by and let his suffering continue unabated.
“What?” he asked, an expression of shock clear across his face.

“Stay here,” she repeated, reckless. “You can sleep on the couch tonight. Tomorrow and the days after…” She shrugged. “It’s not much but I can set up one of the patient rooms for you. There’s beds and while I can’t promise fantastic food you’re always welcome at my table—”

Sakura was cut off as she was wrapped in strong but shaking arms. The worn fabric of her robe brushed against her face and Sakura was surrounded by the strange intermingling scents of herself and Sai, spicy and earthy. Sai pressed his face into her hair, exhaling heavily.

“Sai—”

“Thank you,” Sai said and Sakura could feel his tears in her hair. “Just...thank you.”

Sakura brought her hands up to his back, drawing nonsensical patterns across the expanse. They stood like this for a while, Sakura aware of her wet clothes and the way Sai’s breath heaved from his chest, trying to escape. Sakura made small noises of comfort, hoping that she was helping.

“Are you...writing out the bones of the body on my back?” Sai asked, voice steady but subdued.

“I’m surprised you noticed,” Sakura said, flushing with embarrassment. “It’s something I used to do in medical school too, after I learned all the bones for an exam. It...soothes me.”

Sai pulled back slightly, only to smile down at her. It was a genuine smile, small, wobbly at the edges, but genuine nonetheless. “It soothes me too. Thanks.”

Sai was the first to pull away from the hug and Sakura let him, ignoring the way her heart squeezed as he did his best to erect the barriers he held at the beginning of the night. They were tattered and frayed but Sakura could still see the way his gaze shuttered as he looked away from her. Then he yawned, mouth opening wide.

Sakura giggled. “Time for bed I suppose. Let’s get you fixed up here.”

Sai nodded, following in her footsteps.

As they gathered blankets and pillows, Sakura couldn’t help feeling at ease with her decision. There was something right about it.

Sakura bit her lip as she took in the befuddled expression on Sai’s face. I think I could get used to this...

The pounding of her heart woke her.

Sakura sat up in bed, glancing around wildly. Her clock read 3:20 AM. What had woken her? Sakura’s brows furrowed. It wasn’t a nightmare, she didn’t get those anymore. It was…

Sai.

Sakura bolted out of bed, stepping out into the living room.

Sai stood outside on the balcony, barefoot and dressed once more in his dark clothing. Somehow, it seemed that the garish robe suited him better. Sakura swallowed back the protests on her tongue like whiskey, heavy and bitter, stinging her throat as they went down. “You’re leaving?” she asked instead, doing her best to keep her voice level.
She failed.

Sai looked at her, pale face ancient and distant beneath the silvery light of the moon. He stuck out his tongue and Sakura’s breath caught as she saw the tongue tattoo suffused with golden light. “I am called,” he said, simply as if it explained anything.

“Stay,” Sakura entreated.

He looked at her, pure misery carved into his expression. Sakura blinked back the tears as she took in the pain in his eyes. “Thank you,” he said, forcing one of his fake smiles. Sakura hated it.

Her eyes burned as he stepped off the balcony, consumed by shadows.

Then, she let the tears—the tears that she knew Sai couldn’t cry—fall.

“What did you just say?”

Sakura winced, ducking away from Naruto’s gaze as she continued to wind the bandage around his chest. She wished she hadn’t spoken at all. “Nothing, Naruto, just forget it.”

“It’s not nothing!” Naruto exclaimed, leaning in close to her. “It’s your birthday.”

“I highly doubt birthdays are a major celebration here in Pompeii,” Sakura said. “It gets monotonous after awhile does it not? Centuries passing by in the briefest flicker.”

Naruto pouted at her. “But, but it’s your first birthday in Pompeii! That’s something worth remembering right?”

Sakura found herself softening beneath the weight of his charm. “It is special only because Pompeii is special. Besides, my birthday’s already passed. What does it matter now?”

“It was yesterday! There’s still time isn’t there Menma?” Naruto asked, looking to his silent twin. “It’s still March 28th somewhere right?”

Menma scoffed, shaking his head. “Not on this plane of existence at least.”

“It’s fine,” Sakura said, redirecting her gaze to Naruto’s wound. He’d been messing around with foxfire and found himself with some serious burns. While they were healing at an accelerated rate, Sakura knew that dressing them would expedite the process further. “There’s no need to worry about it. Things have been very busy recently and everyone’s been away on business. It was a peaceful birthday.”

Though she was trying to soothe Naruto, she couldn’t have said anything else that would strike guilt into his heart like her words did. “I’m sorry Sakura,” he said, voice quiet. “We may have been busy, but that’s no excuse for making you feel so unimportant on your birthday.”

Sakura shivered, looking up into the face of a man who suddenly seemed eons beyond her. “That isn’t what happened at all, Naruto!” she exclaimed hotly, looking to Menma in support. He wouldn’t meet her eyes either however. “Oh for the love of—! Look, it does not bother me at all in any shape or fashion that we did not celebrate my birthday. You didn’t know!”

Naruto looked up at her. “Can we make it up to you?”

Sakura sighed, fight leaving her. “Look, we can get a small group together and go out for dinner tonight. I am paying for my meal and we can celebrate the party that way.” Sakura glanced up at the
clock, paling. “I need to get prepped for my next appointment. I assume you know your way out?”

Naruto and Menma waved her off before turning to look at each other. Menma shook his head as he took in Naruto’s wide-eyed enthusiasm.

“She said small party,” Menma warned.

“Semantics!” Naruto exclaimed, waving a hand in Menma’s face.

“Naruto…”

But Naruto wasn’t listening.

Menma shook his head, grabbed Naruto by the collar, and headed for the door. Sakura would have no idea what hit her.

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“Have a wonderful rest of your day,” Shizune said, heading toward the parking lot.

“Sure you don’t want to come along?” Sakura asked, fiddling with her handbag. “We’re meeting at Akimichi’s.”

Shizune laughed, stopping and taking Sakura’s hands. “I would love to join you for a celebration of your birth. Unfortunately I have a prior engagement. With the Spring Planting at hand, I am kept rather busy.”

“Do you need a few days off? A few weeks? Is Chiyo working you too hard?” Sakura demanded, clasping Shizune’s hands.

Shizune blinked, startled before giggling. “No, it’s fine, it’s fine. I’m glad to be a part of the Planting; it’s a pretty big deal here in Pompeii.”

“Please take a couple days off,” Sakura said. “Paid and everything. Don’t run yourself into the ground for my sake.”

Shizune smiled beatifically and bussed kisses over both of Sakura’s cheeks. “Thank you, love.”

“Have fun!” Sakura said, waving her friend off.

Then she looked down at her watch and cursed herself.

She was late.

Sakura raced down the darkened streets, making her way into downtown. Nestled cosily between the florist and the hair salon, Akimichi’s green sign glowed warmly down upon her.

She frowned, surprised to see how dark it was inside. Was it closed? She was only a few minutes late, right? Sakura peered into the window closely, scrutinizing it. This darkness was strange, a shadowy dark that seemed nearly solid.

It seemed artificial.

Sakura braced herself, tensing slightly as she pressed against the bright blue door. It gave, opening with a heavy groan.

The darkness did not extend beyond the doorstep. Sakura swallowed, clutching her phone as she
called, “Hello? Anyone there?”

There was no response.

Sakura stared into the blackness before shaking her head. She wasn’t dealing with this. She turned and headed back down the street.

“Happy birthday!” a multitude of voices exclaimed as light suddenly streamed out through the restaurant.

Sakura turned, blinking in shock at all the people who stood before her. There were nearly a hundred. She located Naruto and scowled. “I said small party!”

Naruto shrugged, grinning at her. “C’mon, this isn’t even the best part!”

He bounded forward, taking her hand and tucking it at his arm as he weaved through the sea of faces.

Sakura answered all the well wishers with cheer, grinning as Ino attached herself at her other hip, scowling all the way.

“I cannot believe you didn’t tell me it was your birthday yesterday! How could you?” Ino pouted. She looked truly hurt.

“Sorry,” Sakura said, patting her hand. “I’d no idea this was such a big deal.”

“Here we are!” Naruto said, pushing her up the stairs and stopping before the door. “Are you ready?”

Sakura nodded, finding anticipation curling in her gut.

Naruto pushed open the door and Sakura found herself breathless. She wasn’t sure how, she expected it to be a combination of some people’s magic, but the sky was magnified above her. It seemed much closer, like she could reach out and brush up against the shimmering stars. Galaxies and planets were within the touch of her fingertips and Sakura couldn’t speak.

“You like it?” Naruto asked nervously. “We got the Nara family to help with casting the skyscape, the Senju brothers did some of the magnification, Karin and the coven of course maintain the spell and the Uzumaki…” He stopped, grinning. “Well, you’ll see what we did shortly.”

“Naruto, this is incredible!” Sakura exclaimed. “How did you pull this off?”

“It was nothing.” He rubbed at the back of his neck, smile pleased. “Everyone was happy to pitch in. We’re really happy you’re here.”

Sakura blinked away the mist that came to her eyes, smiling up at him tremulously.

“Hey, Sakura!” Kiba called. “Come try some of these ribs. They’re to die for!” Sakura headed over, losing Naruto in the crowd. Kiba crowded her into a breath stealing hug before he set her back on her feet. “Happy birthday!”

“Thank you,” Sakura replied. “Now what was this about to die for ribs?”

Sakura settled into her seat between Menma and Naruto, grinning at Ino and Deidara who were arguing across from her. She was full, both of delicious food and of pleasure, surrounded by her
neighbors who came out tonight to share in a celebration of her life. She felt warm. She felt welcomed.

She felt at home, even among the strangeness.

“Okay, okay,” Sakura said, pushing Naruto away. “Stop rubbing this big ‘surprise’ in my face. Go ahead and show me!”

Menma looked up. “It’s about to start.”

Sakura turned her gaze up to the sky. It was still a magnified view of space and Sakura found herself lost again among the galaxies. She laid back from the low sitting table, focusing slowly on the sky above.

She gasped as a streak of light streamed across the sky. She cut her eyes to Menma, surprised to find him watching her with a soft look. He grinned, pointing back at the sky.

Sakura obediently looked back at the sky. Numerous stars were falling across the skyscape. Sakura watched the bright spots as they came more alight before fizzling out into nothingness. There was something poetic about it.

Sakura wasn’t sure what the future held, wasn’t sure when the other shoe would drop. She knew that the higher she climbed, the further she had to fall.

Sakura wasn’t sure she’d survive the impact.

There were still so many unanswered questions and Sakura wasn’t sure of her place in it all.

Somehow she just did not care.

Sakura decided to enjoy the moment, regardless of what the future held. She had people here; people who loved her, who were family to her.

The tears that were shed were surreptitiously wiped away before Sakura said, “I suppose that was the Uzumaki contribution?”

“Yeah,” Naruto said with a wry smile. “How’d you like it?”

“That was one of the best birthday gifts I’ve received in a long time,” Sakura replied, meeting Naruto’s gaze.

He seemed puzzled. “But...you haven’t even opened your presents yet.”

Sakura blinked. “My what?”

Naruto turned, gesturing to a veritable mountain of gifts. “That’s how these things usually go, right? Presents on a birthday?”

Sakura sucked in a heavy sigh. “Oh boy.”
Days later and Sakura was still reeling from the generosity of her friends. Gifts were one thing, but it was hard to shake the feeling that there was something more to her first birthday in Pompeii based on how they blessed her. There were flowers for her almost daily when she came down for work. Every other day someone came in during her lunch break to bring her food and sit and eat with her. Days before she had felt a lacking in the town as more and more people went ‘off’ on business she didn’t understand, but suspected to be tied to Orochimaru’s recent activity. She had mentioned it once and now it seemed all her friends in Pompeii were attempting to compensate for the few weeks she wasn’t bathed in affection.

Sakura loved her friends, and loved the validation from their gifts and visits…but…

“It’s too much.”

Shizune nodded in agreement. “Well, the Senju dropped off flowers yesterday. It’s no surprise the Uchiha would want to outshine their good neighbors.”

Sakura grimaced at the gaudy floral display left on her desk. It was even more lush with flora than the one yesterday, left by sweet Kawarama Senju on behalf of him and his brothers. Sakura had forgotten the blackbirds who saw and heard everything when she took the flowers from the youngest Senju, and gushed to him about how happy she was and how much she loved them.


“Yeah, it’s gorgeous,” Sakura agreed, looking over the swelling display of a dozen different flowers artfully arranged. “It’s just too much. Even for a birthday present, I’ve never been so…spoiled. Is this normal? I mean, it’s been over a week already.”

“Yes, but it’s your first birthday here. Sometimes special celebrations can continue on for weeks. Weddings typically last a whole month when they happen here. It all depends on how important or valued that person is to the community. You have a lot of people in Pompeii who see you as a member who is treasured.” Shizune nodded, eyes rolling towards the window. “Plus, people would much rather celebrate *you* than the spring equinox celebration that’s coming.”

“What? Why is that not a good thing? I thought the spring celebration was for like…rebirth and new life.”

“Oh it is, but this is just the quadrennial spring celebration. Every four years the spring celebration is a little different and people just don’t like the traditions as much as the others.”

“Is there a reason for that?” Sakura asked.

“It’s important to preserve our history and remember the mistakes we and our ancestors made in the past. So, instead of every year we decided that every four years we would add an additional ritual of appeasement into our spring celebration. It’s no terrible thing and we enjoy ourselves well enough because it is a celebration, but it’s not as fun compared to celebrating the life of a person important to you. We would much rather just celebrate *you*, Sakura.”

“What’s the ritual of appeasement for?” Sakura asked, noticing how the crows outside her windows were gone and the room felt much larger than it should. The windows were far away and the doors
even farther. If someone had been listening in on them there would be nothing for them to hear. This was Shizune’s doing.

“It’s better you not know that much,” Shizune whispered sweetly, something sad in her eyes. She reached out and pat Sakura’s cheek fondly. “There’s no need for you to share in our penance. Forget I said all that I did.”

Sakura wanted to ask what the penance was for and what she would do if she didn’t have to share in it, but another part of her wanted to ask about the woods and if what happened to her last autumn was tied to the spring celebrations. She had been back to the woods only once since that last incident, but there had been no more stairs to nowhere or evil fires stalking her through the night.

But that had been before…

“Shizune, we don’t have anyone else for the next hour, I want to check on something in my room real quick. Holler for me if we get a walk in?” Sakura asked.

“Of course.”

With a grateful wave Sakura skipped back and doubled up the stairs to her room on the second floor. Inside, the book had been left on her bed and that’s where she found it once more.

“Heeeey, old friend,” Sakura chuckled, picking it up nervously. Sometimes it didn’t want to talk to her and sometimes it did. She hoped she could get something out of it today.

“What is it now?” the book groused, sounding tired.

“It’s not about Orochimaru this time, I have a different sort of question for you. Do you know what happened to me last fall in the woods? Do you know what that was?”

The book warmed in her hands, she knew it was awake, but it didn’t reply. Sakura held her breath and waited, knowing it could be temperamental with her if it wanted to be. She could feel it still awake, it hadn’t gone to sleep on her, she could tell that much by now. Finally, it shifted in her hands.

“I know what it was.” The book then went silent.

“What was it?” Sakura asked.

The next silence was even longer and Sakura grew afraid that was all she would get out of the book before it shifted and turned open it’s pages. Sakura saw one bleed with a sloppy hand of ink. The ink ran into words and Sakura mutely read.

‘The truth is in the forest. The trees know!’

“The trees know what?” Sakura asked, feeling the book grow cooler under her fingers.

“You’ll have to ask them that yourself, won’t you?” the book chirped before turning on itself and falling out of her hands onto her bed, closed once more.

When Sakura reached for it she could feel how cold it was and knew it was sleeping. There would be nothing more to glean from it after this. This time the book hadn’t answered her on its own, but showed her the answer someone else had discovered.

“I have to go back into the woods again to find the answer,” Sakura said out loud. “Why does that
sound like a bad idea?"

It was too convenient that the next morning was her day off and the weather was impossibly perfect for an early hike. She had wanted an excuse to stay back, but there were only reasons to go out, so she donned her hiking boots, knapsack, and packed plenty of water.

“I really don’t have a death wish, really,” Sakura said to her empty room before locking it behind her.

But before she could regret it, Sakura was already out and at the edge of the woods, inhaling the sharp smells of Douglas fir trees and evergreen needles. It was wonderful and fresh and clean and it made her heart hurt in longing. It was so nice to be outdoors. There were a scattering of pine cones on the floor that crunched underfoot and the sound made tingles at the base of her brain stem.

She remembered why she loved the outdoors so much. She was spoiled with all this compared to the dirty life in the city she had left behind.

It was a perfect day with warm sunlight and brilliant clear skies dotted with just enough clouds to make things shady when they needed to be. Everything was picturesque. It almost made her want to sing.

Sakura hummed softly to herself, content with the world around her. She felt the bark, rough under her fingertips, as she dragged her hands over the tree’s exteriors. Everything felt perfect. How had she ever been afraid of this wonderful place?

“Who is that?”

Sakura stopped humming at the voice and turned, looking around. She couldn’t see anyone between the trees and spun once more, startling when suddenly there was a person standing right in front of her that hadn’t been there mere moments before. She made a noise high pitched and quick before stumbling backwards and grabbing her heart.

“Oh my-Sasori, what are you doing there? You just showed up and freaked me out.” Sakura let out a shaky breath and then gulped when she saw the ax at his side. “What…are you doing here?”

Sasori glared down at her but heaved the ax back up onto his shoulder and Sakura saw that it had a leather cap over the end of the blade to keep it from cutting anything accidentally. When he spoke his voice was dry and baleful.

“What do you think a woodworker would be doing up in the woods with an ax?”

“I mean…specifically, is there something you are doing out here. Do you have a project you’re working on?” Sakura easily recovered, smiling up at the red head before skipping to draw up parallel with him.

Today he was wearing a shirt, but it was loose with shirt sleeves that showed off the ball joints at his elbows and wrists. She could see the joints under his chin and at his neck too, now that she looked for them. They were hard to see if you didn’t know they were there.

“Meh, wood for the spring celebration. Any more details aren’t meant for you to hear,” he groused, mood sullen as he turned his back to her and began to walk away.

“Are you leaving?” Sakura asked, keeping pace with him.
“Are you following me?” he countered.

“For now.” Sakura shrugged when he glared over at her. “Is that such a bad thing?”

“I’m sure there are plenty of other people in the woods for you to entertain, but I have work to do.”

He started to walk away and Sakura stopped, letting him create distance between them. He wasn’t far when she called out to him next.

“I loved the box.”

He stopped and looked back at her, partially over his shoulder.

“I keep it on my dresser and it holds many of my treasures. The detail and skill you put into the decorations is unlike anything I’ve ever seen before. I…sometimes I’ll look at it and notice something new I hadn’t seen before, even days later. Thank you, I know that could have come from only you, even if there was no tag.”

Sasori stared back at her, but there was no glare in his look anymore. He was a creature assembled, put together and made like a doll with joints and add ons. It was hard to see some of his expressions sometimes, but she could see he wasn’t glaring at her anymore. There was something else on his face now.

Sakura went on. “Also, I could tell it took a lot of time and effort to craft, but it was perfect for me. The Sakura blossoms were a nice touch.”

“M-mn…” he hummed, dipping his head a fraction. “It was meant as a-an…anniversary present for your first year in Pompeii.” His words came out slow and his eyes didn’t meet hers. “It wasn’t finished as neatly as I would have liked, but I am glad you appreciate it.”

He rested his ax against a tree and reached down to untie the arms of his black and red flannel and pull it on. Sakura watched him button up the front and then grab his ax again. Now his elbow joints were hidden and the ones around his neck were harder to see. The ones on his fingers were masked with magic, so it seemed as if Sasori was as human or normal as one could be.

“How long did you work on it?” Sakura asked, walking up next to him, hands behind her back.

“How long is not long for someone like you?” Sakura asked, suspecting that all the details he had put into her box must have been more than a few days labor. Some of the details were so tiny they must have been etched out with a pin she though. There were people happy under the Sakura trees and sometimes she thought she recognized them as people from Pompeii, like Ino, Gaara, and Naruto.

Sasori shrugged. “I couldn’t put a number on it. I worked…on and off…I had other things to do in between and thought I would have more time to finish it. I didn’t know it was your birthday so close to the spring equinox.”

“I didn’t know it was going to be such a big deal. I thought birthdays were like just another thing. Some people I’ve met are hundred of years old and don’t even remember the actual number. I think it would get mundane after a while.”

“You’re different,” Sasori said easily, and Sakura felt a pang of panic for a split second. She didn’t want to be different, she didn’t want to be ‘outside’ or apart from the others in Pompeii, even though
she knew she was still something of an outside that couldn’t share in their penance and history.

Sensing her tension Sasori quickly corrected himself. “Special. You’re special. To Pompeii and everyone here. A doctor is special anyways, but you’re one of the far kinder and more treasured ones to come through. Plus, you’re still young, aren’t you? The kids cling to you so easily.”

“Kids? You mean Naruto and Ino and Gaara?” Sakura remembered the carvings on her box and realized that most of them were of the younger generation that Ino hung out with. There were a few older people like Shizune on the box, but almost exclusively the collection of Sakura observers carved into the wood were of the youngest in Pompeii.

Sakura felt her face flush. “Is that what I seem like to you?” she whined, cheeks burning. “I have a degree and a job!”

Sasori looked almost as if he were panicking when he heard her tone and saw her flush. She saw his mouth hang open on a gap then quickly shut. “No—not like that. You’re an adult, you’re old enough to be an adult, you’re not a kid, but you’re less than a century, right?”

“Does that make me a child?” Sakura whined, feeling even more embarrassed. No one else had told her this. Was a century the turning point out of adolescence?

“Obviously not. I don’t see you as a child, Sakura,” Sasori spoke quickly. “You’re a wom-wo- woman.” His voice caught towards the end and if he could Sakura was sure he would have blushed with how pained his eyes seemed as he looked down at her. His mouth was open and gaping again.

Sakura reached up and rubbed her face with her hands, stretching out the skin under her eyes. “It’s okay, I get it. I’m not the oldest one here and I guess I’m just sensitive because I’m used to being dismissed and treated differently in my work profession. I-I graduated early from NYU and was one of the youngest in my field with a degree. I had people doubting me constantly because of my age and my sex. I’m more sensitive to it than I admit, but I’m fine now, really.”

“You didn’t deserve that,” Sasori said. “You do an amazing job, better than anyone that came before you.”

Sakura forced herself to laugh. “Thank you, Sasori. I’m…I’m also sorry for making you uncomfortable. I hadn’t meant to put you in such an awkward situation.”

“You didn’t.”

Sakura looked up at him and smiled slyly until he stuttered again.

“N-not really. Don’t apologize for it.”

“All the same, I bet I was more annoying than you expected. I even kept you from finishing your work. It was important work too, wasn’t it?”

He was watching her, hardly half a head taller than her, he stared down at her from his spot alongside her. “It’s nothing that couldn’t have waited another hour or day.”

“Oh good, because I didn’t want to say it before, but I’m really glad I ran into you. I was a little afraid to come out here on my own.” She smiled so easily as they began to start walking off in a new direction together.

“Why?”
“Oh, you know, um last autumn I had a few missteps in the forests and ended up going weird places for hours even though it felt like minutes. It freaked me out and the Senju couldn’t even tell me what it was that was happening. I haven’t been back here since, but I thought if I wanted to better understand what happened I should…put in a little more effort. Does that make sense?”

“You came here on you own?” She nodded. “Knowing that the last time you did so resulted in unpleasant events?”

“Oh well, they were actually a little worse than unpleasant, but you know it was so long ago.”

“You didn’t ask anyone to come with you?” he asked again, still walking.

“I didn’t want to bother anyone, and it was sort of last minute. Plus, a lot of people have been busy. I don’t know what it is, but like, when I went to visit Pein at his diner he wasn’t there and the Uchiha leave gifts with their birds, but they’re also out and about with the Senju more than usual. Everyone is working hard in their own way. It would have been selfish of me to bother them.”

“Are you an idiot?” he asked, voice dry. “That’s the stupidest thing you’ve ever said.”

Sakura missed a step and staggered. “Excuse me?”

“You think you would be selfish to ‘bother’ them by asking them to go on a hike with you. The matter of your safety aside, who do you think wouldn’t want to go on a hike with you if you asked them.”

“Everyone here is really nice and I knew most would say yes if I asked, but I didn’t…want to be a bother.” Sakura paused to make a face up at the redhead. “You make it sound like I’m being the conceited one here, but I don’t think I was stupid.”

“Maybe, but it’s fine to be stupid from time to time. Regardless, it worked out with me.”

“Oh yes, thank you for that, my knight in shining armor,” Sakura gushed in exaggeration. “Where ever would I have been without you to cross my path?”

“Humming to yourself like a loon in the middle of the woods,” he breathed out with an almost smile on his face.

“Excuse you,” Sakura gasped. “Rude!”

Sasori looked at her face and there was something like ice breaking in her heart as she saw his expression shift. His lips stretched and the smile was matched in his eyes as he laughed down at her. It was a full, honest, sort of laugh he hadn’t thought about or meant to let slip. Sakura felt her heart catch and pinch painfully for a split second before it warmed and she laughed along with him, unable to fight it. Sasori was laughing and it made her want to laugh too.

The pair of them went on walking a little further. Eventually Sasori explained to her that he was looking for the Genesis tree, a tree that sometimes springs up during the ritual performed on Founder’s Day. When Sakura and the other boys from the Mizu gang went into that trance things had happened on the outside and one of those things was a tree springing up in the middle of Pompeii somewhere.

“How will you be able to tell which one it is?” Sakura asked, momentarily marveled by the vast amount of trees she had already seen.

“It’s one that wasn’t there before. Only the experts of the wood even attempt to go out looking for it.
Aside from that, there is some residual magic in it that others can track. It’s…every four years a tree has to be cut and presented as tribute during the Spring Celebration, and if there is a genesis tree it has to be that one.”

“What happens if you can’t find that tree in time?” Sakura asked.

Sasori shrugged. “That’s not happened before, but I guess it would be bad. Maybe. It’s a break in tradition, but there’s not any real danger.”

Sakura hummed along, following him down the path. “Do you get the tree for the ceremony every four years?”

“Yeah, usually. I mean, it depends on who finds it and sometimes that’s one of the Senju brats because they’re all over this forest, but I’ve found it several times in recent years. Regardless, I always go out looking.”

“Is it the same type of special tree, or is it sometimes different?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“I’m curious! That’s how people learn. Besides, I feel like no one talks to me that much about Pompeii’s history apart from Shizune, but even she has things she won’t tell me.”

Sasori nodded, pushing away a tree branch and walking around it. “There are some things about Pompeii you are better off not knowing about.”

Sakura watched him for an expression as they walked. “Like Orochimaru?”

Sasori didn’t miss a step, but she saw his lips thin. “Among others, yes. Learning about them might draw their gaze to you, so it is best if you knew less.”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve already pissed that guy off when I helped Haku out a curse. Chiyo helped with that, so you might have heard.” When he nodded grimly Sakura went on. “So, it doesn’t matter much more than this. I’m better off knowing.”

“There are things far more dangerous than Orochimaru to worry about,” Sasori sighed, stopping and squinting into the tree line ahead of them.

He picked up his ax off his shoulder and popped the button around the leather head covering, letting it fall to the floor as the blade’s edge gleamed in the early morning light. “Sakura, get behind me.”

Sakura recognized the tone and rushed to do as she said, situating herself behind him. Above them the sky had turned gray and was thicker with clouds than before. A moment later one cracked and a strike of lightning hit the ground close to where Sakura had just been standing. It cleared in a burst of smoke and there, standing at the stroke point, was a nonchalant looking Pein.

“Oh, you.” Sasori’s tone and expression were bland as he straightened, but didn’t put down the ax. He still held onto it and kept his arms wide enough to shield Sakura.

“Me,” Pein said, brushing smoke off his shoulders. “But it’s not you I was here to see.”

Sakura touched Sasori’s arm and peeked out from behind him. “Pein? You’re back.”

The nonchalant edges and disinterested expression were wiped off Pein’s person as he straightened at the sound of her voice. His eyes went to her instantly and everything about him was different.
“Sakura,” he breathed, voice as soft as his eyes as he looked down at her. “You weren’t at work and someone mentioned you went into the woods. I was worried. Are you well?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just went on a walk. Wait, when did you get back? You’ve been gone.”

There was a real sort of hurt in his eyes as he nodded to her. “I’m sorry. Yes, I was gone but I heard you came looking for me? I can’t apologize enough. I even missed your birthday.”

Sakura waved it off. “There will be others. It’s not a big deal.”

Pein swallowed, looking from her to the redhead who stood immediately next to her, ax still raised. “What are you wearing, Sasori?” he asked, a single brow raised in scrutiny. Are you trying to hide your imperfections?”

Sasori didn’t react, but lowered his ax and reached for the leather head covering, avoiding eye contact. Wordlessly he started to cover up the blade with the leather.

“There are none.” Both males looked over at Sakura as she spoke. Sakura blinked at the attention but didn’t hesitate. “Sasori doesn’t have any imperfections.”

Sasori’s head turned away and he looked down, buttoning the clasp to his ax head covering while Pein readjusted himself and then coughed into his hand.

“Of course. Nothing ill meant in it. I’ll apologize for the slip of the tongue just now. Regardless, Sakura…” he waved a hand and there was a ripple of magic around them. He reached for her and offered her his hand. “I have something I wanted to show you. To make up for my absence please let me take you to your birthday present.”

Sakura looked back over at Sasori who hadn’t turned back to face her. Something about the lines in his back made it hard to approach him.

“Sasori,” she called out to him but he didn’t turn around or react. “Thank you for spending time with me and staying with me. I enjoyed our time out. Let’s do it again sometime soon. I’ll help you look for your tree.”

She took Pein’s hand and with a snap the pair were gone.

Without Sakura there Sasori could feel the wave of Pompeii’s magic clustered not far off. He swallowed, trying to move past the feeling he still wrestled with from Sakura’s words. Where his heart should have been hurt. He’d have to look at that later and check to make sure there was nothing wrong.

He followed a less tread path deeper until he came upon it. Wide and stretching with a solid trunk wide enough to be buried in, the buds were starting to come in varying shades of pale pink. Any day now the Sakura buds would bloom and fall.

Sasori dropped his ax to his side and sighed, lacking the motivation to move. Just this once he wanted to pretend he never found the genesis tree. Maybe this could be the year they broke with tradition.

-  

Meanwhile, with Pein and Sakura
“No,” Sakura whispered, eyes wide.

“Happy birthday.”

“Pein…”

“Yes, dearest?” he purred, head close to hers.

“That’s a car.”

“Mmmhum,” he hummed into the side of her head, nuzzling her hair before pulling back. “It’s a 1957 chevy convertible. I thought you might like it.”
Chapter Notes

who knew books had such good taste in shows?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The papers on her desk scattered then settled as the door to the clinic flew open. Sakura looked up, worried for but a moment before a smile lit up her face. “Zetsu!” she exclaimed. “It’s been too long!”

He looked down at her, abashed as he saw what she was doing. “Sorry. I’ll go.”

Sakura scrambled up from her desk, waving her hands hurriedly. “No, no, it’s fine! I’m glad you stopped by!”

It was true. Shizune was out today and it’d been a slow, somewhat monotonous day. The book was still miffed at her over the comment she’d made earlier, something about rebinding that smart mouth of its. It left Sakura to her thoughts, loud and crowding her head, demanding to be heard. Introspection had never suited her well.

“How may I be of assistance?” she inquired, locking all the confidential files away and putting on a winsome smile.

Zetsu looked momentarily dumbstruck before he shook himself free of his thoughts. “I...it’s moronic -usually I do it myself but I don’t have the fucking reach-!” He cut himself off, flushing. Clinically, Sakura found it quite fascinating, the way his blush played out across both sides of his face, adding a liveliness to him that she’d yet to see.

“Whatever it is, I know it isn’t foolish,” Sakura said, voice gentled by years of practice. She stood and placed her hand gently over one of his, grip loose so he could easily tug away. He didn’t. “Why don’t we go to the back and discuss it there? Have you been by the clinic before? I haven’t found a file…”

“...We burned it,” was his short response as Sakura guided him to one of the side rooms in the clinic.

Sakura took it in stride, fetching a pre-prepared clipboard and readying a pen. “What seems to be the problem?”

His flush creeped up his face to his ears and down his chest beneath his shirt. Zetsu sighed angrily and yanked his shirt over his head. Sakura was impressed with his fit of dexterity as he maneuvered it skillfully over his Venus flytrap. She blinked as she was suddenly confronted by his expansive chest. Her eyes darted over his toned features, marvelling at the way the Venus flytrap faded into skin just below his chest.

Thankfully, she was quickly distracted by green offshoots that were scattered wildly across the flytrap and his skin. Sakura leaned in close, surprised to find small bulbs at the end of the stringy
offshoots, some in mid-bloom. They were pretty little white flowers that certainly did not fit with the off putting mein Zetsu wore as armor.

“What are they?” Sakura asked, looking up into Zetsu’s face.

“They’re the problem,” he said, scratching at one irritably. “They’re called scapes; I always get them this time of year.”

“Do they hurt?” Sakura said, watching the skin redden where he scratched.

“Not really,” he replied. “Itchy as hell though. They tend to tire us out; it expends energy that could be used by the flytrap.”

“How do you usually treat it?” Sakura asked.

“Trimming,” Zetsu replied, face grim and resolute. “I normally would do so myself but this year’s batch is much more plentiful than years past. It is also a bit difficult to do such precise work on myself with the flytrap obscuring my view.”

Sakura hummed empathetically, seeing the way the scapes trailed up and over his back. “This happens every year?”

“For millennia,” he sighed, slouching back on his hands. “Will you be able to help?”

“Of course,” Sakura said, pulling on her gloves. “How painful has this process been for you in the past?”

“Excruciating.” He paused and examined the stalks, most of which were three to four inches in length. Zetsu slumped. “Normally I would have taken care of this earlier—if you hadn’t been such a wuss about coming—but circumstances prevented it. Mito has agreed to cover the costs.”

Sakura nodded, straightening her shoulders. She could do this. “How do you usually go about this? Shears? Knife?”

“Usually we just rip it out,” Zetsu said with a shrug.

“No wonder it hurts!” Sakura exclaimed, clutching his arm and looking over his skin. Sure enough, there were areas of faint pockmarks, countless indents of careless self-flagellation. She looked up at him, queasy. “I won’t be using that same method. I can’t.”

Zetsu shrugged, looking vaguely uncomfortable. Sakura quickly released him, worried that she was invading his space. “That’s fine,” Zetsu replied, frowning slightly, bereft. “You’ll have to dig slightly to get them out. They’re rooted in.”

Sakura nodded, rummaged through her kit, and pulled out a package containing a thin scalpel. She removed the scalpel from the wrapping, catching the way Zetsu’s gold eyes alighted nervously upon the instrument. She placed it down within his line of sight. “Would you like a regional anesthetic? It may numb the pain.”

“There’s such a thing? What witchery is this?”

“Well, it’s medicine,” Sakura said. “Some of what Chiyo makes down at the pharmacy is magically based, but this is all science, human-made. Any known allergies?” He shook his head, still looking surprised. “I can administer the anesthetic, but I must let you know that it causes drowsiness. You’ll be sedated and probably in a state near sleep. Are you still alright with taking the anesthetic?”
“... I, we, trust you,” he replied, refusing to look at her.

Sakura felt something warm lodge high in her chest and she had to fight to control her emotions as she went about prepping everything. It was good to know that she was trusted as a professional, especially by someone like Zetsu, who didn’t seem to trust often. She was a doctor and it was vindicating to be accepted as such.

She returned to the room and found that Zetsu was settled into the chair, head tilted at an awkward position to accommodate the flytrap. He smiled nervously as she came in and said, “Let’s do this then, shall we?”

“Let me know at any point if you feel uncomfortable and want me to stop,” Sakura said. “Hold out your non-dominant arm please.” He bared his left arm to her, watching as she began to swab the skin. “This will sting a little and you’ll begin to feel drowsy in just a few moments.” She looked up at him and caught his gaze. “Are you ready?”

He swallowed, remembering the aching numbness and blistering darkness when he last trusted someone millennia ago. “I am.”

Sakura waited until his eyes fell below half mast before beginning. It was gruesome work; even through the plastic gloves Sakura could feel the texture of the little plants as she tirelessly worked her scalpel beneath them and pulled them away, trying to cause as little damage as possible. Zetsu didn’t seem to notice, smiling dazedly instead, but Sakura saw the trickles of what appeared to be chlorophyll leaking from the areas that once housed the scapes.

“How are you feeling?” Sakura asked as she pressed a ball of cotton to a wound on his shoulder. His smile grew dreamy and Sakura tensed as he swiped clumsily at her hair. “I’m great. You’re great. You look like a flower. Delicious. Warm. Wonderful.”

Sakura suppressed a snort as she continued on. If only Naruto could see him like this, he’d know that Zetsu wasn’t the big threat he was made out to be. Certainly, he was intimidating, but seeing him like this, the hairs on his Venus flytrap fluttering as it fell open and snapped shut at seemingly random intervals as he continued to heap rambling praise upon her, well, it took the wind right out of any sense of fear. He just wasn’t scary.

Truthfully, he was rather adorable.

Sakura made quick time, plucking out more than forty of the scapes before all was said and done. She left them in a pile on her cart as she placed down the scalpel and scrutinized Zetsu. He was still reeling beneath the effects of the anesthetic and, aside from the small blood (chlorophyll?) loss, he seemed fine.

Sakura puttered around the room, tidying up as she waited for the anesthesia to wear off. She watched Zetsu and saw that he was teetering on the verge of sleep. She couldn’t resist a smile as she turned off the overhead light and made for the door. He’d mentioned that the scapes expended his energy, no doubt having them removed had tuckered him out.

Her hand was on the door handle when he called, “Wait!” his voice desperate and loud.

Sakura turned, startled.

Zetsu leaned heavily against the reclined chair, hand out in entreating dismay. “Don’t go,” he said and Sakura saw his eyes were wild and hazy from the drugs still in his system. Then she noticed the
way his abrupt movements disrupted his wounds, green liquid streaking his pants and splattering across the tiles. “Not again.”

Sakura rushed to his side, bracing him as she assisted him in taking his seat. “I’m not leaving,” she said as she fussed over the wounds, staunching their flow. “Lay back down Zetsu, all is well.”

Still he watched her and, in the dark room, his eyes glowed. “Don’t leave,” he said, breath hitching. “I can’t.” Zetsu cut himself off, screwing his eyes shut.

Sakura began to hum a lullaby half-remembered from her childhood. Memories of being safely ensconced between her parents filled her head and her breath caught. Thankfully, Zetsu was asleep, hand relaxing its grip on her own.

Zetsu woke to the scritch of pen on paper. A glance outside told him it was late in the day and he found himself awake and aware in a way he hadn’t been in quite some time. He rubbed at his chest, frowning thoughtfully at the lightly wrapped bandages there. Then it all came back to him.

He turned and found Sakura seated at the desk facing away from him. Something warm lodged in his chest.

She hadn’t left him.

As he stood, far more clumsily than he cared for, she turned, smiling. “You’re awake! I ordered a salve from Chiyo while you were asleep,” she said. “It is laced lightly with the restorative properties of unicorn breath so it should heal your wounds. I used a bit on the bandages you’re currently wearing.”

Zetsu nodded; it explained the strange absence of pain. “Thank you,” he said, imbuing the words with as much reverence as he could. “I...Spring is never easy for me. This is the best Spring I’ve had in centuries, perhaps even in my lifetime.”

He caught the way that put color in her cheeks. “I’m happy to be of assistance,” she said shyly. Her voice took on more power as she said, “Make sure to apply the salve twice daily; once when you wake up and once before you go to sleep. Change the bandages just as often. This should be enough for two days but if the wounds persist or get infected please come see me.”

“I will,” he said, hesitating before bowing low to her. He could hardly remember the last time he’d shown anyone such deference, but countless empires had risen and crumbled in the time since. Zetsu respected so very few. She was the last yet living. Zetsu sighed and stood once more, accepting the jar of purple paste from her. “I cannot begin to thank you.”

Sakura patted his hand and regarded him solemnly. “Truly, Zetsu, it is my pleasure. Let me walk you out.”

“Are we on speaking terms again?” Sakura called as she shut her front door. “Please don’t deprive me of your stellar wit!”

She glanced around, smiling as the book flopped open on her coffee table, pages ruffling. Sakura walked over to it and read in gilded letters: Don’t patronize me.

Sakura snorted and ran a hand along the binding. “I’m not,” she said. “Truly, I enjoy your company.” She paused, biting her lip for a moment. “And I also need your help with a recipe.”
...what did you have in mind?

“Well, remember when we binge-watched *Chopped*?” Sakura asked. She still wasn’t sure how exactly a book managed to watch television but it was quite fond of the Food Network.


“So…” Sakura said as she picked it up and carried it into the kitchen with her. “I have milk, eggs, and some strawberries that are about to go out of date.”

The book flipped to a different page, embellished in fancy script in…

“French? I can’t speak French,” Sakura said. The words on the page shifted, blended together, and then… “Crepes? You’re so fancy, my friend.”

Of course.

Sakura settled into making crepes. As always, the art of cooking soothed her after a long day. There was something nice about measuring out the ingredients and combining them together in such a way that something delicious emerged. It took her mind off her worries for at least a moment, her thoughts centered around flipping the crepe rather than Orochimaru and curses and strange things among the trees.

Smells a little crisp.

“Hush,” Sakura said. “I’m the one who’ll be eating these, unless…”

I don’t eat.

Sakura hummed, putting everything together on a plate and, in a display of dexterity, balancing both the book and plate as she went back into the living room and pulled up her *Netflix* queue.

*Put on Cutthroat!*

“Okay, okay,” Sakura said, biting into the crepe. Her nose wrinkled slightly. The book was right. It was too crisp.

They settled in for the night, watching as Alton Brown tortured the contestants. Sakura brushed the sugar from her fingers and began to rifle through the book. It was a nice pastime and usually it gave her a few memes for her troubles.

This time, however, there were words scrawled across multiple pages. Sakura paused and perused it more closely. It was written with a precise, concise hand.

*CE 474, Week 42*

It isn’t working.

Why isn’t it working?

We were so close this time. *This war has taken its toll. Countless dead on both sides and for what? A fear of the unknown? A choice to misunderstand, to malign, to murder?*

The handwriting shook and trailed off, water stains on the page, before picking up a few lines down.
It was a child this time. Lucille. A witch raised among humans only to be tested, tried, and tortured when she started a small fire.

She was four.

Four.

They’re trying, gods above and below, they’re trying but I can see it wearing on them. We keep trying these experiments and for what? A vampire who can eat garlic but still cannot go out in sunlight. Werewolves immune to the silver, but brains forever trapped in their most primal state.

I fear we will be exterminated long before we find a cure, a way to walk among the mortals.

At least...I will be gone.

She hides it but this is killing her too. The both of us will fade before long and where does that leave him? Alone in the world, roaming in the throes of immortality?

I fear he will end his life if it comes to that.

There are potential solutions, of course. I have heard the whispers. Those magics though, they bear heavy consequences. However, soon enough my hand shall be forced.

Could I do it? Could I-

The rest of the page was blank. “What the hell!” Sakura exclaimed, glaring down at the book.

It snapped shut and Sakura could feel its disdain. Show’s over.

“How could I even read that writing? Was it really from the 5th century?”

Of course. It is quite simple for me to translate the words and paraphrase it into a lingo for you to actually understand.

“So that was?”

...a cautionary tale. Or the beginning of one at least. Blind ambition is the cesspool that courts folly. Desperate ambition? Far worse.

“But-”

Go to sleep Sakura. Some tales aren’t made for the telling. Not in full at least.

Sakura, sensing the book’s odd pensive mood, set him on her nightstand and began her nightly ablutions.

She crawled into bed, unsatisfied and apprehensive.

Sakura didn’t get much sleep that night.

“Are you sure this is appropriate attire?” Sakura asked, smoothing down her black dress. She hadn’t worn it in years. “This feels much more suited to a funeral than to a festival celebrating spring.”

“We call it the Spring Celebration sure,” Ino said as she rummaged through her closet. “It honestly
does give off a funeral vibe though.” She crowed triumphantly, drawing out a dark dress with intricate beading. She caught Sakura’s puzzled expression. “Look, it’s tradition. Spring is the season of birth and renewal, certainly, of both the good and the bad. Everything comes back to life. There’s a balance, blah, blah, blah.” Ino pulled a face, the one she did whenever the elder town denizens carried on about tradition, which, unfortunately, was often. “Basically we all show up, the puppet presents us with a sculpture of some sort that we then set on fire.”

“You set Sasori’s work on fire?” Sakura asked, horrified. “It’s all so beautiful though!”

“He doesn’t care,” Ino said as she started to change. “The fat check town hall writes him undoubtedly cushions the blow. Sakura, really, we do this every year. It isn’t as barbaric as it all seems to you. Didn’t you do something similar around this time of year back in New York?”

Sakura laughed. “We had Spring cleaning, which we often didn’t get around to until June. Oh, and there’s this fun tradition with Peeps.” When met with Ino’s blank stare, she elaborated, “They’re these colorful sugar-coated marshmallows that are shaped like chicks or rabbits. Ami and I’d stick toothpicks in them and put ’em in the microwave. They’d blow up and have a swordfight. Zaku was always so pissed at us about it!”

“And you think this tradition is brutal,” Ino said with an exasperated shake of her head. “We’ve done this for centuries. If we stopped, I’m pretty sure Danzo would have a stroke on the spot.”

“Good thing I’ll be there, then,” Sakura said, nose in the air. “You ready?”

“How do I look?”

Sakura looked her friend over, taking in the elegant twist to her hair and the dress that looked as if it’d been draped for her. “Gorgeous,” Sakura said, ducking her head.

Ino grinned and ensconced Sakura’s hand into her own. “My favorite part of the Spring Celebration is what comes after the so-called celebration.”

“And what is that?” Sakura asked.

“Getting shitfaced with friends at the lesser Hyuga compound,” Ino said.

“Lesser-“

“Looking hot, ladies,” Tayuya said, sidling up alongside them and fitting herself against Sakura’s free side. She wore a dark suit and vest, hair pulled away from her striking face. “Ready to get drunk off your asses?”

“I really think you are missing the spirit of this thing,” Sakura said, before getting distracted.

They were on Main Street, near the doorway tree, but everything looked different, somehow muted. Candles hung, suspended in the air and cast meager light across the sea of faces swathed in black. It was dusk and the sunlight was fading fast.

Hashirama and Tobirama stood on a raised platform that seemed to be made of a living tree as it shifted ever so slightly beneath them at odd intervals. They seemed restless, as did the rest of the crowd.

“What’s wrong?” Sakura whispered, glancing around.

“Sasori’s late,” Ino replied. “I mean, we are late, through no fault of my own may I add, but Sasori’s
late. He’s always on time. Deidara complains about it constantly. Calls him a slave driver.”

Sakura frowned, something clenching in her gut.

Something was wrong.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Sakura said, slipping away from them.

She wasn’t sure where she was going, but she knew she had to do something. She waded through the crowd, listening to the worried murmurs that rose like waves before a hurricane. She didn’t know much about this ceremony, just that it was rooted in old traditions, but there was something important about these rites.

A hand clamped down on her arm. It was familiar, wooden and solid.

Sakura turned, eyes bright with expectation. “S-Yamato,” she said, the expectation dimming somewhat into concern. He seemed pale. “Are you well, Yamato?”

His eyes wouldn’t meet hers, focused instead on the stage. He licked his lips. “This year’s different. Look at them; they’re worried.”

There was a burst of chatter as, in a puff of smoke, Sasori appeared next to the stage with a flourish. He adjusted the cuffs of his tailored suit before grasping at the cloth that covered the thing beside him.

“I apologize for my tardiness,” he said, voice amplified by magic. He seemed harried, flushed even. “We were delayed in the transport.”

“No matter,” Tobirama said, jaw ticking in a way that said that it did, in fact, very much matter. “You’re here now. May we begin, puppeteer?”

“Of course,” he replied. “I present you with this year’s Genesis!”

He pulled the cover away and revealed a chair. Sakura’s brow furrowed as she eyed it. He’d spared no detail, creating a high-backed, winged chair carved intricately with chains of delicate flowers and insects. It was all curved lines and majesty and Sakura suddenly realized this wasn’t a chair.

It was a throne.

“Wrong,” Yamato muttered, voice such a low grumble Sakura doubted he meant for her to hear him. “Wrong, wrong, wrong.”

“You’ve outdone yourself this time, Sasori!” Hashirama said, thumping the man on the back.

“We’ll take it from here,” Tobirama said.

Sasori inclined his head and stepped away with nary a protest. He watched them intently, perhaps even nervously as the brothers lifted the chair up onto the dais. Sakura’s eyes narrowed.

Sasori was expecting something.

“We gather here on the cusp of Spring and new life,” Hashirama said and suddenly his voice seemed to echo and boom like the crack of a falling tree.

“We have weathered the blight of winter,” Tobirama continued and the words thrummed within Sakura’s ribcage, making a home there. This was a pledge of some sort, ancient in a way Sakura
doubted she’d ever comprehend. Since the world began to spin, this creed, unspoken until this point, existed.

“Now we are here for the birth of a new year, for an end to the endless night.” Hashirama bowed his head and Sakura was surprised to see his antlers emerging from the crown of his head. She almost missed the way he grew little branches up and around the throne, branches that were cracked and brittle.

“Tonight we shed our former skins, our former selves. As we know, such a rebirth is painful.” Tobirama’s eyes were liquid gold and his antlers rose high above his head.

Sakura’s hair stood on end as around her, power was released and true forms were realized. She could feel their magic, their essence, their very souls battering up against her, jubilant in their release. Many people remained the same, but something in their eyes changed.

There was a fire there, burning brighter than the stars.

“Tonight we bind the evils that linger back to the earth where they belong.” Hashirama lit a match and the flame was green.

“With the sacrifice of the Genesis tree, we remain free,” Tobirama said.

“Join us in tree’s heartsong,” they said as Hashirama touched the flame to a branch curling around the armrest.

In the following days, Sakura still wouldn’t be able to suss out the exact details of what happened. The throne caught alight quickly as, around her, people began to sing. There were no words to the song, at least, not ones that she could name. In fact, everyone seemed to sing a different song, harmonious in their discord. Sakura’s voice rose to join them, setting herself adrift among the sea of others. It was beautiful and Sakura knew that it couldn’t be replicated, even when they came together in the following year. This was fleeting, special.

Sakura only felt the tacky slick of tears on her face when Yamato brushed his fingers below her eyes. She glanced up.

He wasn’t looking at her. Instead he traded his gaze between Hashirama and the throne, brow furrowed in contemplation. Sakura read something in his eyes, something that worried her.

Sakura jolted when she caught Hashirama looking directly at them.

Rather, looking at Yamato.

From this distance, she couldn’t be sure, but she was nearly certain that, awash with the flames of the Genesis tree, Hashirama’s eyes reflected exactly what was in Yamato’s.

Fear.

Chapter End Notes

imagine my delight when I found out that venus flytraps DO actually blossom with little flowers. the more you know~~
Things go wrong and the world holds its breath. Sometimes the world holds its breath for minutes, sometimes for days, sometimes for years. In a land as ancient and mysterious as Pompeii, Yamato wouldn’t have been surprised if it held its breath for a century before people saw the fruit of their mistakes. If ever.

Something wrong had been done, but would anything come of it? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe it wouldn’t come to torment them until most of them had aged out of their near immortal lifespans and faded to dust. There was always that hope, but that did nothing to remove the unnerving sensation of ‘wrong’ in his gut. It was a part of him now, and he couldn’t shake it.

He wondered if his Senju betters felt the same, or if they would ever admit to as much. He suspected if he asked all he would get would be lies. Hashirama was good at that, lying directly to Yamato’s face. For the rest of the world he was sunshine in the trees and softness from the down feathers of a dove’s wings, but Yamato was different. Hashirama would never be kind or soft or vulnerably honest with Yamato.

Yamato hadn’t been wrong when he saw fear in the older creature’s eyes. He knew that much. The Senju were unsettled by something, but neither had said anything after the ceremony and everything else went according to plan. The song had been sung, the fire had burned down, nothing was left of Sasori’s chair and everyone seemed happy and settled like they should be.

Almost everyone.

Yamato looked down at his fingers and remembered the moisture collected there on his fingertips. Her tears.

Something pulled painfully in his chest and he stopped to wince at the feel of it. It was still so odd to feel these feelings after growing into them. The fay took centuries to mature their emotions and for the first many decades of their physical maturity they expressed and felt precious few emotions. It was a sign of great age and maturity when the fay could feel something. Which made the younger ones who lacked such emotions excellent thespians.

It made Yamato smirk coyly to himself that at least he had come into his feelings far quicker and even Tobirama was still budding into new feelings. It was rare that Yamato could make the Senju feel anything other than disgust, but the idea that Tobirama might be jealous for something Yamato had….well that made him glad.

It was probably easier for Sakura to stand his company if he had more emotions and could feel things. Yamato hadn’t missed the way the younger Senju brother watched Sakura from afar at the afterparty but held himself back from approaching her when it looked like she wasn’t going to seek him out. Yamato had never seen Tobirama look so dejected with so little facial expression.

Or maybe it didn’t have anything to do with how little emotion Tobirama felt. Maybe the reason he held himself back from reaching for her was the same reason so many others held their hands to their chests or broke their necks getting to her first.

Sakura was the ripple in their stagnant waters, and she was sweet to drink. It was more than just her being new, far more than just that. New people had come to Pompeii in the past fifty to one hundred
years and Yamato didn’t remember any of them really changing the environment of their community the way Sakura had. Yes, she was a doctor, but it wasn’t her job that made the town take notice of her and then keep taking notice of her.

Yamato looked down at his hand again and tried to remember what it felt like to touch her tears. They had rolled off so innocently when he had been distracted, but now he wished they were still there on his fingers, connecting him to her. He wanted that little part of her at least.

What was she?

Something ancient in him, something older that him, a part of his origins, stirred painfully in a delight whenever she was near. He had thought it was simply attraction at first, but he doubted it was this… terrifying. He knew he would be short of breath when attracted to someone, books had taught him that much. But with Sakura it was more than just a little short of breath. He felt like falling when she looked at him and in his falling there was nothing to breath in.

Yamato wanted to stay there in that emotion, in that moment, with her eyes set on nothing but him. He wanted to be looked at, that had been a long held envy of his, but now he just wanted one person to look at him. If the rest of the world decided to keep ignoring and shun him that would be fine. He was used to that, he could endure that. Just… he wished Sakura would be exempt from the shunning. That would be enough for him.

Just her.

If something went wrong because they had screwed up the ceremony then hell could come to Pompeii for all Yamato cared. Likely, it wouldn’t be anything worse than a harsh winter, but it could be far worse for all the love Yamato had for his home. He didn’t care for it that much. He just hoped nothing evil reached out and touched her. If Sakura was safe than it made all the difference to Yamato.

His service and indebted nature to the Senju had long been rotting in his mouth, but he had never wanted to break free and leave the only place he felt marginally welcomed or at peace. A part of him was Senju and a part of him was Pompeii. That had changed after meeting Sakura. For the first time in his life Yamato wanted to be active, not passive, in his service. He wanted to be helpful because he saw how it would benefit someone precious to him.

How lovely it was to feel things. Poor Tobirama. Yamato wanted to pity the younger brother who still felt feelings through the fay filter of late bloomage, but didn’t. Tobirama could sit in moose shit for all Yamato cared.

Yamato stopped outside the large gates hidden between sunshine and shadow. His hands had been lax in his pockets, but now he pulled one out and knocked, almost hating how he was here and doing what he was about to do. While he had always been helpful, he had never gone so far out of his way to be of aid to others. It had always been at the beck and call of his betters that he did anything, but not this time.

The gates opened inward and in a show of surprise it was truly Hashirama himself who stood there, answering the summons. His expression was ever grave when regarding Yamato, nothing new. However, this time there was also confusion and unsettlement. Yamato had never come to the Senju lands of his own free will. Not since the first year, the year he learned how much he was disliked and thought of as disgusting. It have been many decades since then.

“Yamato,” Hashirama nodded in greeting, expression tight. “You have come to call.”
“No shit, old man. You know why I’m here.”

“I’m sorry, I am mighty and great but no mind reader in this world.” There was no sarcasm in his voice and Hashirama meant every word he said.

Yamato crossed his arms. “You felt it too, at the ceremony. There is something worth fearing with this misstep.”

“There is no misstep.”

“You don’t need to lie to me when I already know what you know and have felt what you felt. Have your forgotten that?” Yamato felt bolder with each new word.

Hashirama narrowed his eyes and readjusted his posture. “You are emboldened. I assure you, however, that if there were such a misstep there would be nothing to concern yourself with. If Sasori mistakenly shipped the wrong tree for us to burn then that just means we go out the next day and burn it at its roots. Tobirama has already found the tree and taken care of it. One day does not make a difference in the ceremony.”

“Then why were you so scared?”

“I was not. I might have been surprised that Sasori made a mistake, but there is nothing worth fearing with this ritual. It is purely to commemorate and remember. Now,” Hashirama drew himself up more and stared down his nose at Yamato. “Is there anything else, or have you nothing new regarding the true threat in our grasses. We have not heard any developments regarding Orochimaru in several days.”

“Because you chase him underground again.”

“Which is where you should be right now, not meddling in the traditions and affairs of the regular crowd.” His tone was the tone of a ruler, one who was used to talking down to others.

Yamato didn’t like the underground. He did better there than most, it was where he was first formed, but it brought him no pleasure or joy to return to the darkness and hunt in it like he was suited to the ick of a world’s underbelly. None of the other Senju followed Orochimaru into the under dark or the dammed spaces between shadow and shade. It wasn’t in their nature to go there, so they didn’t.

Sakura’s face showed up, and Yamato remembered her on the park bench, asking him with concern and worry. He remembered hearing about how she had ripped one of Orochimaru’s curses straight out of that Haku boy. He remembered her and the memory stung pleasantly in his heart.

“Fine, I’ll go, but there is somewhere I need to stop first.” Yamato’s hands were fists at his side but he wasn’t upset with Hashirama this time. The eldest Senju could be annoying and make him want to swing some days, but now there was a different motivation to the white of his knuckles.

Yamato didn’t wait to hear anything more from Hashirama, but turned on his heel and started to walk away from the gates, pausing only once when he caught sight of Tobirama coming out from the forest with something in one hand, cradled against his opposite arm.

The two passed each other and it was like a second frozen in time. Yamato saw the tree branch, still blooming with beautiful pink blossoms of Sakura petals. The Senju held it too tenderly for someone still unable to feel as deeply as Yamato suspected of the younger Senju brother.

Tobirama glared at Yamato as they passed, but there was no hesitation or pause in his step. A few seconds and they had passed each other and Tobirama was being greeted by his brother.
Yamato had better hearing than most, and maybe Hashirama forgot that, but it didn’t matter as Yamato was able to catch the last few whispers between brothers before the gate shut them both off from the rest of the world.

“You said you had burned it all. What did you bring back?”

“Peace, brother. It’s no more than a wood shaving. Soon it will die, let me keep this.”

“You’ve never asked for anything before. Why this and why now? It is not in your nature to bend the rules for anything.”

“…I thought it was beautiful. It reminded me of her.”

Yamato stopped where he stood, feeling pins and needles in his heart. He couldn’t help but smile bitterly and look back over his shoulder at where the gate should have been. They were out of sight now, closed off between sunshine and shade, but the memory was still crystal clear. He could remember the look on Tobirama’s face being a little less impassive than usual.

So maybe Tobirama, the stone cold face of stoic Senju pride and rule, could feel a little more than Yamato first assumed. Huh. That was new.

Yamato didn’t have to think too hard on what or who had inspired such a shift and change in behavior. And as much as he wanted to, he couldn’t blame Tobirama. Yamato was no different, after all.

Sakura had her ankles crossed and propped high above her head. They rested on the arm of the coffee table while she slouched against the side of her couch and dug her spoon deeper into the gelato. It was a pistachio mint color the same shade as her eyes in a pale light, Ino said. Sakura didn’t know what shadow or color Ino saw when she looked, but Sakura was sure she didn’t really care as she dug into her frozen treat.

Most of the girls were worn out and lay sprawled out among the various sleeping bags and mattresses that had been set up to cushion them as they slept. The only one of the girls who had stepped out early had been Temari, saying she needed to get back to make sure her brothers were well and hadn’t partied too hard.

Some parts of Pompeii were still partying into the late of the night. Apparently the Uchiha were terrible about late parties, even though the spring equinox was supposed to be a Senju thing. The fair folk liked to retire before the festivities went too late. Also, Tobirama looked like he had work to do after the burning.

A tapping on the window made her set her gelato carton aside, but she kept a spoon heavy with the treat in her hand to suck on as she approached the window over the lightly stirring bodies of her girlfriends.

Sakura pushed open the glass door and stepped out to look around, spoon still in her mouth. The night was clear and beautiful all around her. A single cloud drifted through the sky, blocking out patches of stars as it passed. It edged in front of the waxing moon and glowed a little brighter, outlined in silver. As it passed, more of the world returned to standing out in a silver light.

“Anyone out there?” Karin asked, sliding up alongside Sakura and bumping her with a hip.

Sakura bumped back naturally before she even knew she was doing it. It was something Ino would do.
“No. Sorry if I woke you. I just thought I heard something and then I just…got distracted looking at
the sky I guess.” Sakura pulled the spoon from her mouth, silver and clean. “I’ve had too much ice
cream. I can’t sleep.”

“Yet you’re still eating it.”

“Oh no, this is gelato, not ice cream. There is a difference.”

“Does gelato not keep you up?” Karin asked in a disbelieving tone that paired perfectly with a look a
 teasing.

Sakura pouted. “I guess not. But I have a day off tomorrow so I thought it would be fine to ignore
the rules for once. I can stay up late.”

“Which is astonishing when you consider how hard you played…lava was it?”

Sakura nodded, grinning. “The floor is lava, yeah, that’s what we call it. You did pretty well
yourself. Almost as good as me.”

Karin grinned back and shrugged. “But not as good as in Karaoke. You sure you don’t want some
lessons, canary?”

Sakura groaned, turning around to lean against the railing. “I’ve never been a fantastic singer under
pressure, and the song selection didn’t suit my vocal range or whatever.”

“Yes, it wasn’t suited to a cat’s horrified howling, was it?”

Sakura fake gasped and slapped the redhead with the back of her hand. “Rude! I invite you into my
house and share my traditions with you and this is how I am repaid, with ridicule and mockery.”

“And sass,” Karin added with a finger raised.

Sakura shook her head and sighed far too loudly for it to be anything other than fake. “You have no
compassion for my poor feelings, do you?”

Karin’s grin was impish and mischievous. She looked very much like her cousins in that her grin
made Sakura think of a fox’s sly smile. “None whatsoever.”

“You’re so mean to me.”

“You did hear how I have a reputation, right? I’m the mean cousin that doesn’t make trouble that
drags the rest of the family into. Menma is the one that makes messy trouble.”

“And do I want to ask what the difference is?” Sakura asked, waving her silver spoon around in
front of her face, occasionally sucking on the end of it, looking for the last bit of gelato flavor.

“Probably not, because you’re one of the least nosy people I know but I’m going to tell you anyway
because this is what you do at sleepovers. You talk about boys, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure that’s the context that’s intended.”

“It’s the only context I’m interested in.”

Sakura laughed. She had originally thought Ino was the huge gossip, but it was becoming clear who
Ino learned all her tips and tricks from.
“Fine, tell me about your lovely cousin and why he makes a mess of himself and you don’t.”

Karin shrugged, still grinning. “Well, it’s less than I don’t and more of I can’t. Naruto and Menma are really unique, the one in a thousand type. Our family might have a hundred new births every century, and that’s during the good years, so yeah, they’re even more rare all things considered. But, they have the potential to ascend the limits of what is typical for the fox tribe and walk on a god’s level, like Pein. I think Madara has that potential as well, but he’s powerful enough without godhood.”

Sakura suddenly remembered the messy encounter she had witnessed during one of her first weeks in Pompeii, where Menma traded blows with Pein in the dinner. She hadn’t ever really received clarity on the beef between the two, and to be fair, she never brought it up.

“What does Pein think of that?” Sakura asked slowly, knowing Pein was classified as a god. She had a guess but she wanted to hear more from Karin.

“Now or then?” Karin tugged on the drawstrings to her extra short, shorts. “At first he was trilled with the idea of maybe not being so alone or something. He wanted to mentor the boys and train them and bond, but Menma made a mess of things. Naruto was a dofus and just slid out of it like a kid, running away and goofing off so badly Pein wouldn’t want to mentor him. Menma wasn’t like that. Menma was-is headstrong in all things and talked with his fists to the god. Menma can’t help but make a mess of things. It’s in his nature. Maybe he’ll be the fox god of fistfights.”

“Pein didn’t like being denied,” Sakura guessed.

“It wasn’t just that, Menma wanted to square up and prove he was just as good as a god the way he was and didn’t need to change. He’s still looking for that fight to this day. He wants to prove himself like a child. It’s been years and Pein has been…well, I don’t know if he’s given up on the boys, but he doesn’t bring it up or make any efforts anymore. But maybe he’s just waiting. He’s lonely enough for it.”

“What does Pein think of that?”

Sakura asked, trying to think of any other gods she knew of. Was Kakuzu a god or something else? The two of them seemed equal when it came to might, but Pein was a lot more austentatious, the way Sakura suspected a god would be. He got her a car for her birthday, after all.

“Well, you know how it’s rude to ask, so I don’t really know. But gods aren’t the most humble, so if there were more than just Pein I think we would hear about it,” Said Karin. She eyed Sakura out of the corner of a gaze and then chuckled. “But you never know. Sometimes a god can be humble and sneak in right under your nose.”

Karin grabbed for Sakura’s wrist and tugged her back inside over to where Ino was dozing. Karin kicked at the blond’s side and Ino came awake on a grunt of pain that swiftly turned to anger as she saw it was Karin.

“What the hell?” Ino seethed.

“We’re going out for late night trouble!” Karin hissed in a whisper that wanted to be a shout.

“Out?” Sakura squeaked, looking to the clock that read a bleary 1:23AM. “It’s too late-early. At this hour? Who would be out and up?”

“It’s a special night, everyone is up who wants a little more adventure in their life. I want it. Leave Tayuya, she’ll murder me if we try to wake her.”
“You’re such a-ugh,” Ino groaned, rising to her feet and running a hand through her messy hair that looked all the more beautiful for its disheveled state. She looked over Karin’s shoulder to Sakura and then grinned. “But I think you’re right about the adventure bit.”

“Guys, nothing good happens after 2AM,” Sakura sighed, looking nervously to the clock again.

“Good,” Karin cheered, grabbing both girls with one arm each. “Let’s start with the Hyuga compound. Those overprotective sticks wouldn’t let their girls sleepover one night, so we might as well spring them free.”

“Is this going to be illegal?” Sakura whispered in fear.

“Only if we get caught,” Ino chuckled, reaching behind Karin’s back to grab Sakura’s hand. “Come on, adventure time, right?”

Sakura couldn’t help but grin, even after she repeated her earlier warning that nothing good ever happens after 2AM.
You driving?” Karin asked, eyes alighting upon the Camaro.

Sakura laughed. “Not a chance. I can’t put any mileage on it. Pein is taking it back.”

The looks Ino and Karin gave her clearly let her know what they thought about that. Still, mercifully, Ino held up her keys. “I’ll drive,” she said, guiding Sakura over to her white 1969 Pontiac GTO. “Backseat, Karin.”

Karin rolled her eyes but climbed in. Sakura marveled for a moment over the vehicle before tentatively taking a seat, barely trusting herself as she relaxed against the red interior.

“You’ve updated it a bit,” Ino said, voice tinted with pride. “It’s a bonding activity for dad and me.”

“She’s spent the last few decades on it,” Karin said. “Soon enough she’ll move onto a new one. What was it before this? Horses?”

Ino sniffed imperiously and focused on driving.

Sakura could tell this was an old point of contention so she stayed silent, opting to watch the trees out the window, passing by in a silvery blur. The moon hung low and heavy in the sky tonight, providing ample light for the task at hand.

“So where is the Hyuga estate?” Sakura asked, rolling down the window and pressing her hand out against the wind.

“Edge of town,” Karin said. “Like most of the big clans it isn’t technically within the town borders but they consider it so.”

“They’re a reclusive bunch,” Ino said, hands tightening on the steering wheel. “Most of them are assholes but Hinata and Hanabi are good ones. They’re just stuck in the worst family.”

Karin hummed. “Ino just hates Neji. He’s...well, he’s been unkind about Deidara. He isn’t the most empathetic individual.”

A sharp crack came from the steering wheel and Sakura blinked at Ino’s hands. Beneath the light of the moon they seemed scaly and curved, tipped with heavy nails. She blinked and her hands were pale and smooth once more.

“Neji Hyuga is a prick,” Ino said and her voice is different, reverberating from within her chest in a way that makes Sakura’s ears hurt.
Sakura placed her hand over Ino’s, frowning slightly as she felt something moving, shifting, beneath her skin. Ino looked at her and Sakura smiled slightly. “Well, I’m sure it’ll piss him off to know we got Hinata and Hanabi away right beneath his nose.”

Ino chuckled and everything settled back into place, though the fine hairs at the back of Sakura’s neck remained at attention. It was difficult to forget the eerie, somewhat abrasive touch of vengeful magic, even when it wasn’t directed her way.

“How exactly are we getting them out?” Sakura asked. “Logistically speaking, I’m guessing there’s protection against outsiders.”

“We’ve got a plan,” Ino said, pulling over on the side of the road and placing the car in park. “The perfect plan,” Karin said as she climbed out.

“And what plan is that?” Sakura asked, looking around. They were rather deep into the forest and she couldn’t see any sign of nearby civilization, let alone an estate.

Ino smirked, pulling her phone out of her pocket. “We call the police.”

“What?” Sakura asked. “Are we trying to get caught?”

Ino and Karin laughed in a way rich with history that left Sakura feeling bereft. “The police station is Uchiha territory,” Karin said. “Everyone knows that the Uchiha run the police in the same way that the Hyuga run the banks.”

“The Uchiha and the Hyuga despise each other. They’re descended from the same family line, way back in the day, but now they’re basically enemies,” Ino said. “Both families pride themselves in their heritage and each claims to be descended from the elder sibling of the family line.”

“The Hyuga would never call the police, much less invite them onto their property.” Karin’s smile is wide and vicious. “So that’s exactly what they’re going to do.”

“It’s a good plan,” Sakura admitted, smiling. “How do you plan on disguising your voice?”

“Leave that to me,” Ino said, opening a packet of bright blue powder. She upended it into her mouth, shuddering as she swallowed it down. “Voice modulator,” she said, her voice pitching low and smoky. She stuck out her tongue, showing off its blue shade. “Took it from Tayuya’s pack. She’s quite good at the small spells. She even has an online store for them now.”

“Impressive,” Sakura said, still startled by the deep, masculine voice coming from Ino. “Do we need to text Hinata and Hanabi?”

“They already know,” Karin replied, watching with interest as Ino called the police department, performing her part of a terse, uptight Hyuga flawlessly. “We need to get closer to the estate itself. They’ll be out in about fifteen minutes and we need to meet them halfway.”

“In the forest,” Sakura said. It wasn’t a question exactly, more resignation to the fact.

All roads in Pompeii led to the forest.

“Yep,” Karin said, oblivious to Sakura’s growing sense of unease. Nothing had happened at all in recent months, but Sakura was still wary of the looming trees. There was something sinister in their soft whisperings caught upon the wind. “They’ve got magic warding the place. Nothing as good as what I can do, obviously, but it’s still there. You won’t be able to even see the place until we’re right
“That’s some strong magic,” Sakura said.

“It’s Chinese magic,” Karin said. “Trust me when I say Japanese magic is better.”

Sakura stared at her, nonplussed.

Ino sighed, throwing an arm around her to propel her forward. “The Uzumaki may get a tad patriotic when it comes to their homeland’s magic.” She raised her brows. “You know, being kitsune and all.”

“And the Hyuga have roots in China?” Sakura asked.

Ino nodded. “As much as we have roots anywhere. We’re so long-lived that we probably have a host of different nations running in our veins.” She grinned. “It’s helpful really. Diversity broadens our magic to further horizons, aiding and abetting our growth as a people.”

“So why latch onto a specific country?” Sakura asked, curious now.

“A lot of it has to do with the folklore,” Karin replied, throwing her arm over Sakura’s shoulder so all three of them marched alongside each other. “Who remembers us? Who keeps our magic alive through the art of story weaving? There are kitsune all around the world but the place we’re best remembered and respected is Japan. They honor us with their tales and we honor them in turn by claiming them as our home.”

“That’s beautiful,” Sakura said softly.

Ino’s smile is wistful and wanting. “Among mortals it is the only way we’re still alive. Our existence as living, breathing flesh is long forgotten, confined within the pages of books called fiction. On the lips of mortals, however, we live once more. Our acts, our history, our names are spoken once more with reverence and fear. Long after the years weather and wither us, we will still be remembered.”

Sakura couldn’t speak through the heaviness that laid over them. Her throat was tight against the misery and passion so clearly etched in both of their expressions. It was a pain beyond reckoning, sharpened against the whetstone of time.

“And anyway,” Ino said, clearing her throat. “That’s why some families claim particular nations or regions as their heartland.” She broke away from them, moving up ahead. “We need to scout for Hanabi and Hinata.”

Sakura opened her mouth to respond, only for her words to die away as a sprawling mansion appeared through the thicket.

“Told you it was abrupt,” Karin murmured, eyes on Ino. “Stay here and keep lookout. Ino’s flustered and she isn’t known for having the best control.” She glanced at Sakura and squeezed her shoulder in apology before stepping off after Ino.

Sakura settled into the nook of a tree, able to see the front lawn of the Hyuga estate clearly. Police sirens rent the air as dozens of cars pulled up in front of the house, red and blue lights flashing. A number of Hyuga poured out of the home and Sakura could hear the angry exchange of vitriolic words above the sirens.

Neither Uchiha nor Hyuga was pleased.

A gasp rattled out of Sakura as a few of the Hyuga transformed in a cascade of glittering metal.
Dragons.

They were dragons.

Long dragons. *Chinese* dragons. Unfortunately, the heady sense of discovery was off put by a constricting force around her waist.

Oh.

Seemed that it *wasn’t* the magnificence of the display that drew her breath away.

Well then.

Ino started when a hand was laid across her shoulder, ready to ruffle her feathers into a threatening display as she turned. “Oh,” she said as she met Karin’s eyes. The shifting beneath her skin ceased for the moment though Ino knew it was only a matter of time before she boiled over. “It’s you.”

“It’s me,” Karin said agreeably, though the tightness of her mouth belied her tone. “What is with you tonight? I mean, you’re flighty but you’re usually not so aggressive.”

“The moult is coming on soon,” Ino replied through gritted teeth. “I don’t like be out in the open like this.”

“Then why’d you agree to come?” Karin hissed. “You could’ve stayed with Tayuya. She doesn’t show it, but I know this is freaking Sakura out. Hell, it’s freaking me out!”

Ino felt the push of feathers subside completely as she honed in on one thing. “Sakura?”

Karin was tempted to laugh at Ino’s dazed look but she refrained, knowing this was a difficult time of year for her. “Yeah, you idiot. Sakura. We convinced her to go out on a grand adventure with us and we aren’t even through with the first activity yet! You need to calm down.”

Ino closed her eyes and breathed deeply, turning her thoughts away from her current state of vulnerability and focusing on something much more pleasant. Sakura. Brilliant, deep eyes, the sort Ino felt she could dive into. A smile so radiant it made Ino smile just looking upon it. Secrets traded in ink across a scattering of years, long before there was a face to put to the name. A love so deep that it settled into Ino’s hollow bones, filling them with a joy she’d yet to experience.

Ino fought back the urge to crow her triumph to the sky as she came back to herself and looked at Karin once more.

“Thank you,” she said, pressing her forehead against Karin’s.

Karin’s eyes brightened with mischief and Ino realized that this was going to be a long, memorable night.

Ino stepped away from Karin, a buoyancy in her step that wasn’t there before. “Sakura-” she called, turning back to where the girl was stationed. “Sak-”

She cut herself off as she stared at the place where Sakura once stood. The trees were bent and twisted in a cage and Ino couldn’t see hide or hair of Sakura in their midst. They roiled, flailing angrily around something at the center.
It had to be Sakura.

Without thought, Ino’s wings burst forth, pale feathers racing across her skin. They were ragged and worn, but they could manage the task of attacking much better than human arms. “Is this Hashirama?” she demanded, barely recognizing her voice for its guttural quality. “Or that bastard clone?”

“Doesn’t feel like their work,” Karin replied and from the corner of Ino’s eye she could see a few of her tails lashing about in an angry manner. “It feels one and the same with them and this is different. It’s older.”

Ino didn’t have time to contemplate the implications of that. Right now, her one goal was freeing Sakura.

She beat away the branches in her path, feeling vindictive glee every time one snapped and fell away from the rest. She knew Karin was working at it too and saw the scrape high upon Karin’s cheek. Distantly, she recognized that they were making quite a bit of noise and that soon others would hear them between her loud, warbling war cry and the thunderous creaking of the trees.

Trees were not meant to move like this, not this quickly. She recognized their sounds for the agonized cries that they were and a spark within her clicked.

Something at the Spring Celebration had gone terribly awry.

Ino was quickly distracted as she saw a small, battered fist break free of the writhing tree limbs, holding a glinting object.

An ear splitting roar shook Ino as a dragon darted forward, dancing among the trees to their center. It was a large dragon, painted an eerie misty color in the moonlight as it screamed its fury for all the world to hear. The trees, still bunched in a tight ball, went still. All was silent and Ino desperately searched for traces of color or movement within the branches.

Nothing happened.

Ino strode forward, beating her wings against the branches with enough power to chip and warp them with her brute force.

Ino didn’t notice she was crying until a soft, exhausted voice called, “Told you nothing good comes after 2AM.”

Ino brushed the tears from her face, looking up with heartbreaking hope. Sakura lounged almost listlessly against the dragon’s side, cradling her right arm. There was some sort of gold liquid soaking into her shirt. Her eyes, however, were clear and her lips drawn up in victory.

Ino raced forward, glancing momentarily up at the dragon. It bristled slightly before calming, lavender eyes liquid as it turned its head back to Sakura.

Ino folded Sakura into her wings, nuzzling her face against her hair. She could smell the salt on her and it grounded Ino, knowing that Sakura was here before her, alive and in one piece. She was careful with her, recognizing the dark patches of skin as blossoming bruises. She didn’t realize she was vocalizing her anger until Sakura placed a hand over hers, smiling wryly. “Trees, even the strangely flexible ones of Pompeii, are still solid.”

“What was that?” Ino asked, teeth bared. She wanted to tear something to pieces, bludgeon something until it gave way beneath her. Ino was a tornado of vengeance, feathers, and righteous
fury, ready to attack as soon as the enemy presented itself.

“The forest doesn’t seem to like me,” Sakura replied, eyes casted off to the side, unseeing. “Anyway, I was doing just fine when Hinata joined the fray.” Sakura held up the thin switchblade. “Sai gave it to me.”

“Is this your blood?” Ino demanded, looking at the gold mess upon her shirt.

“It’s the trees’, I believe,” Sakura said, shaking her head in amazement. “They definitely didn’t like the knife. That’s when they broke my wrist.”

“They what?” Ino demanded and she heard Hinata issue a piercing bark before beginning to shrink.

“They broke my wrist,” Sakura said, in a way that suggested a potent combination of shock and adrenaline. Hinata, now in human form once more, wrapped herself around Sakura and burrowed her face against her shoulder. “Some adventure huh?”

“Sakura,” Ino began, watching Hinata. Her pupils were still slit and there were patches of pale scales lining her skin. “Have you encountered this before?”

“Oh yeah,” Sakura replied. “A couple of times last year. Thought it was over with, that the forest was used to me or whatever but as it turns out the forest is still a jerk.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Hinata asked and her voice was still beastly.

“I did. I guess it wasn’t to the right people.” Sakura grinned. “We should probably head back to the clinic so I can set my wrist.”

Hinata and Ino exchanged glances over Sakura’s head as they were swarmed by Uchiha and Hyuga clansmen. In this, they were agreed.

Whoever, whatever, did this to Sakura was going to pay.

But first, they had to find them.

It was time for a hunt.
Sakura noticed the Hyuga coming out of the shadows between trees first, but the Uchiha were behind her and Karin and Ino were instantly on guard while Hinata simply bristled at their arrival and drew herself closer to Sakura.

“Sakura!” Shisui exclaimed, touching down like an acrobat from the branches.

There was a split second when his shoes weren’t shoes, and his hands weren’t hands, but feathers and talons. He reached for her and held his hand back before it could extend close enough to penetrate her personal bubble.

Half a heartbeat later Itachi was beside Shisui, red eyes spinning and oddly fixated on the bloom of sick colors around her wrist. One second he was shadow, the next he had pulled himself out of it and taken physical form.

“What happened?” Itachi asked curtly.

“That’s not a concern we are unable to deal with ourselves, Uchiha,” Neji interrupted, coming up to stand along Sakura and Hinata. He shared a look with his cousin over Sakura’s head that was part blaming part questioning.

“As if,” Shisui sneered.

“We will not be dismissed so casually,” Itachi added, bristling.

Around his head the silken strands of hair seemed to electrify as his red eyes glowed brighter. In response Neji’s pearl colored orbs took on a new level of shine and the veins around his eyes started to stand out. Several other Hyuga came up behind Neji and while Itachi and Shisui were not outnumbered, they did not back down.

“Is this why nothing gets done or solved around here?” Sakura asked, eyes narrowed as she cradled her throbbing wrist to her chest.

Shisui looked hurt first, but her words had an impact on each posturing male. The aggression drained. Both Neji and Itachi seemed to pull back and shift their attention from each other to her and the girls.

“You’re hurt,” Neji stated, trying to still sound matter of fact and not embarrassed about having to be told to stow his ego with a look. “We can get you ice for that. Come inside.”

“We’re going back to the clinic, I don’t need ice, I need to set it,” Sakura said, trying to keep her voice level. Neji couldn’t tell if it was the pain or emotions that made her words almost wobble.

“We still need to know what happened,” Shisui said, voice soft and apologetic.

“Then add yourselves to the list, because I’d like to be the first one to get the memo on what sort of freaky business I keep running into,” Sakura snapped, turning to glare at the Uchiha. “This has happened before, and the Senju said they would be looking into it. Was that a lie? A cover up, or do none of you really know?”
Behind Ino looked down and away, ears burning. Hesitantly she reached out and grabbed a piece of Sakura’s shirt, something to keep them connected.

“The Senju are pursuing leads on Orochimaru.” Itachi glanced upwards at the tree behind her and the parts of it that were still bleeding gold. “He has been known to dabble in the manipulation of their tree craft for his own perversions.”

He didn’t say it, but Sakura knew he was talking about Yamato.

“This was Orochimaru? You and the Senju know that for sure?” Sakura asked, voice turning sharper and sharper with every passing minute the pain in her wrist grew.

Shock would only keep her pain free for a precious little longer before she would have to feel the full force of the break. She had less and less patience for their political bullshit and placating.

Itachi didn’t meet her eyes when he answered. “We would have to confirm that with the Senju, but logically speaking... it stands to reason that this is his doing.”

Karin made a dismissing sound with her teeth and even Ino huffed a little louder in disbelief, neither buying Itachi’s story for what it was; a story. There was no proof and very little evidence to link the trees to the snake monster. But in addition to that, at least Karin’s gut told her that this was something else, something older. Sakura believed that more than she believed Itachi’s words.

“Then what is he doing targeting me? Why now? Why only in the forest? What the hell are his motives?” Sakura felt herself shake with anger. “Why hasn’t anything been done?”

She didn’t say anything else about how angry she was that she wasn’t being included in the investigation or updated with the progress. They told her they would take care of it, pat her on the head, and then went out on their own in separate groups that didn’t work together. She wanted to be kept updated and informed about the thing that had nearly taken her life on more than one occasion, but didn’t feel like she was worth it by the way she was treated. They might like her enough, but they sure as hell didn’t see her as someone important enough to share information with. She wasn’t worth that.

‘Outsider.’

“The Senju are working on it and have made significant progress with the leads available to them.”

“What have you done about it?” Sakura snapped, voice sharp, eyes sharper. Shisui almost flinched. “This is a problem for everyone I thought? I thought Orochimaru was that bad a guy. Why is it only the Senju working on it? And you don’t really mean the Senju, you mean Yamato, because he’s the only one doing anything aside from postering on the stage.”

The air turned stale and Sakura suddenly felt dangerous in front of the monster men of Pompeii. She felt inflated with her own sort of magic. She knew the dirty secrets hidden upon the undersides of their town and she wasn’t scared to bare them in the light. She wasn’t afraid of words when she was covered in gold ichor and blooming bruises. Her bone was broken, these secrets wouldn’t stay in the dark any longer if it meant she had to pay any more for them.

She felt dangerous.

“I think it best we take this inside,” Neji said after a breath. He canted his eyes up to the trees and then back at Sakura.

“I think we were just leaving anyway,” Hinata said, lowering her head to Sakura’s shoulder. She
looked over at Karin and then Ino. “Right?”

“Hinata,” Neji hissed, looking a cross between angry and embarrassed. “The hour is late.”

“Indeed, cousin. I will not abandon my friend at such a late hour. You may send a car to the clinic in the morning.” Hinata tugged at Sakura, looking to Karin who seemed the most put together of the girls. Ino looked sick and small clinging to Sakura. “Let’s go.”

“Wait, a statement! We-we need to take a statement on the incident still,” Shisui said, starting to walk sideways to keep up with the girls as they started moving back out of the forest.

Sakura stopped, turning only her head over her shoulder. Her hair was a mess that picked up in the late night breeze, showing off more of her bruises. Her lip was bleeding from where she had bit it so hard it bloomed red.

“A statement? Here, then listen to this. Not for the first time, something in this forest has wanted me, specifically me, like a midnight snack. I was sitting, minding my own business and the tree started to move on its own. Reached out and swallowed me up like I was something tasty. I did what I could to fight it off. I was able to hurt it with my knife but then it got even angrier and *broke my wrist*.”

It hurt, but Sakura turned and showed off her wrist where the colors were even darker than before. It looked ugly enough to make Neji sneer.

“The blood isn’t yours?” Shisui asked softly, looking at the gold ichor speckled and smeared across her front.

“No, it’s not, we just asked her that,” Karin interjected, causing Shisui to turn towards her and glare.

“Why didn’t you do more to protect yourself?” Itachi asked, voice less affectionate than his cousin’s.

“Was a knife all you could manage?”

“*Itachi*,” Shisui hissed in a scandalized sort of tone.

It was the tone that made Sakura flush and realize what it really was that Itachi was asking. Why hadn’t she transformed, used magic, or fought back with the monster inside? Why hadn’t she spelled and hexed her way out of the tree? If it hadn’t been for Karin, Ino, and Hinata’s help Sakura wasn’t sure she would have been able to get free on her own with just a tiny blade. That tree had been more than just wood and bark. It had been alive and hungry and nasty with her.

Itachi had asked her a highly inappropriate question in a public space that made it hard for her to answer. How could she tell him the reason for her weakness when all her friends were watching? How could she joke off such a wound?

“I think we are done here;” Ino broke in, suddenly ruffled and agitated more so than before. Her hold on Sakura’s shirt shook and her eyes were shards of flashing blue. “We’re going. You wanna ask stupid, victim blaming questions then take it up with an attorney. My family knows a good one.”

Sakura might have been mistaken, but Neji seemed to roll his eyes in a dismissive manner as he crossed his arms and leaned back on his heels. Ino didn’t seem to miss it, as she saved part of her glare for the Hyuga male.

“Come on,” Karin insisted, helping lead the group back to the car.

Thankfully no one came up to stop them as they piled into the GTO and pulled away. It was only when they were back on the main road, wind in their hair, that Karin said anything else.
“All other chaos aside, that’s the easiest it’s ever been to remove Hinata from Neji’s watch. I didn’t think I’d ever see that boy back down so fast.” She turned around in her seat. “Like dude, he just let us all walk out.”

Sakura cradled her wrist and grinned sourly through the pain. “Glad I could be helpful.”

The wrist was set and bandaged, but it was the bruises that really made Sakura wince and avoid mirrors. She took a day off, and was pleased to hear that most of her appointments had been able and willing to reschedule for when she was feeling better.

Shizune did what she could, but it was heartwarming to hear how the halflings insisted Sakura eat and rest until she was better, since the eating was what fixed everything for their people. They would wait until she was better. The gnome family that kept coming back with new children said their kids could wait a week or two before getting their annual checkups.

Sakura knew she would be fine if she didn’t get any last minute surprises.

A tea set down on the counter in front of her made Sakura look up from the computer. She blinked before glancing up to Shizune.

“What’s that?”

“It will help advance the bone in its healing, it’s a Tsunade secret formula. Don’t tell her I shared it with you. Even if it’s not the recipe, I know she’s a hoarder when it comes to her remedies unless she’s administering them herself.”

Sakura felt her eyebrows raise. “Really? It is okay I drink it?”

Shizune glared the way mothers glare at their stubborn children. “Drink it. I don’t care what anyone says. You heal too slowly on your own. You’re almost as bad as the halflings we had to reschedule. But don’t worry. A few years and it will all get easier.”

Sakura smiled weakly, accepting the tea and the kiss to her hair. Sakura knew that creatures who didn’t transform healed just as slowly as any old human, but the gnomes, halflings, and other smaller stature creatures like dwarves seemed to heal at an even slower pace. Dwarves were a bit different though, since when their bones broke it was a much bigger deal because their marrow was some of the most durable organic material Sakura had ever come across.

It was getting harder and harder to not see how pathetic she seemed when compared to the others she helped.

Sakura cradled her tea and took it back up to her room, leaving the computer and the work behind for a later time and date. She was a hypocrite that couldn’t honestly rest even when she told everyone else she treated to do the same.

She settled down into her bed covers and pulled her knees up as she reclined with her tea. Around her were the stuffed animals her friends had gotten her for her birthday in various states of rest. She pulled one of the yellow ones onto her lab and held it to her chest before tipping the tea back.

The tea was horrendous and she finished it all, knowing that the best things for a body tasted the worst.

“That could be improved with some mint I think,” Sakura coughed, making a face as the recoil made
her shiver. “Ugh, no wonder Tsunade didn’t want to share it with anyone. I’d be embarrassed too.”

Sakura turned over on her side and curled up around her stuffed plushie. It helped to hold onto something, even if that thing was non living. It gave her the feeling that maybe, *maybe*, she wasn’t as alone as she felt.

She felt bad for the rest of the girls who had fallen into hot water with their parents and families over the incident in the woods. None of them seemed to care and insisted this wasn’t the worst thing they had been caught doing, but Sakura still felt bad for how hard the hammer came down on the girls.

She doubted it was as hard for the sons and boys that caught out late.

Sakura closed her eyes and drifted in and out of snoozing, knowing it was best to heal and not fall into the trap of self loathing that prompted her to hurt herself in emotional ways.

‘Your fault.’

Her eyes snapped open and she pulled herself up in bed, looking for the voice and seeing no one. That voice was hers. She knew that. Her dreamcatcher might have worked at keeping other things out, but on nights where her guilt was a bead in her belly, she was her own worst enemy, harvesting the fruits of her self doubt like rotten fruit.

“Not true,” she said out loud, knowing she was better than her doubts. “It’s not my fault and I didn’t ask for any of it.”

‘Then why were you the only target? You don’t belong and the forest knows. That’s why they are trying to get rid of you.’

Sakura swung her legs over the side and stood. There was no one else in the room but she knew what worked best for her was to face the voice inside her as if it was a figure in front of her. She reached out with her good hand and felt the magic thrumming around her room, protecting her from the outside, loving her enough to protect her. She wasn’t hated. She was loved. She wasn’t as weak as she wanted to believe. She wasn’t the strongest, but she was far from the weakest. She wasn’t—she wasn’t….

“I’m not unwanted,” she forced herself to say out loud, hating how her voice wobbled with the lack of confidence.

The way Itachi watched her, looking like he blamed her for not being able to do more to get free. She hated the way he seemed to see through her and know she wasn’t suited like the babes born and raised on Pompeii ground.

She was an invader but she wasn’t unwanted. She was new, she wasn’t a local, but she wasn’t unwanted. She was a transplant, but she wasn’t a reject. She wasn’t unwanted. She wasn’t! She wasn’t a—!

SLAM

Sakura jumped, turning sharply on her heel, eyes wide to see the book on the floor, pages bent and spine upright. It didn’t have a face but it looked upset. She rushed to pick it up and right it, setting it back on the end of her bed, muttering apologies.

The pages flapped on their own and Sakura flinched back as they began to flip faster and faster through unending pages until they stopped, flat and perfect as the words started to bleed through the pages.
It had been days, maybe a couple of weeks since she had last been shown something from the book. She had honestly forgotten about it for a few days.

They don’t understand.

I’m not like them, I’ll never be like them, and it showed more and more each day. She’s trying to blend in and be one of them but I can’t, even for her, I can’t. I want to, I have never wanted anything more than to just fit, to belong, especially by her side.

I’m frustrated by how little fruit my efforts have presented me. For how badly my wanting is I would have thought that I would have been able to achieve something of merit by now. Did they not consider me prodigy? Did they not say I was brilliant? What good is brilliance if it can not make a space for me to belong, for the both of us to belong, side by side in this damn town?

Sakura recognized the handwriting. It was a little more harried and messy than other times, but it was the same person she had read from times and days before. Instantly her heart hurt for the writer as more and more of their thoughts and recorded feelings showed up inside the book’s pages.

Do others have such doubts, I wonder. It seems they all fit so perfectly into place. Where is their doubt, does it even exist? I can’t be the only one who feels this way, but I’m so alone. I can’t find solace in anyone else, so I must do what I can.

If there is no place for me than I shall carve out for myself a place of belonging. I will take it upon myself to make a place where I fit, where I can belong. The dank of depression is not where I wish to dwell. I will build my castle of belonging with my brilliance.

I will not be denied.

The book went blank, the words bled away and it closed itself seemingly done with her. There were no words from it, but Sakura felt like it was telling her to get over herself and stop dwelling on her dark thoughts. It didn’t like when she did that.

Sakura didn’t think herself brilliant, but if there was one thing she would not deny herself, it was that she was a hard worker. She did not give up, she fought tooth and claw for everything that didn’t just come naturally. She studied twice as hard as the boys with photographic memory and the girls with connections through fathers and friends. Not to disparage anyone else’s efforts, Sakura knew she worked hard, harder than others.

She would build her own sense of belonging. She wasn’t the only one who felt alone in Pompeii, after all.

A jolt raced up her spine and Sakura felt drawn to the stairwell just in time to hear Shizune struggle with a body in their lobby. The sky outside was dim with twilight, but the blood on the floor still gleamed with a reflection of light.

“Yamato,” Sakura gasped, taking the stairs two at a time and landing as lightly as her bones would let her. “What happened?”

He looked barely awake and she doubted he was fully aware of his surroundings. It was a wonder how he managed to get himself to her clinic in such a condition.

“The Senju dropped him off like this.”
Sakura felt her face heat with anger, but saved that for later. “Let’s get him into the room.”

“Sakura, your wrist!”

“It’s fine,” she ground out, too angry to feel the ache. “Your tea works wonderfully.”

Shizune didn’t say anything more as she helped carry the broken man into the open room with a table just waiting for him. Sakura helped prep him, cutting away his torn and bloody shirt before dabbing the areas of puncture. She noted that the punctures were all over, most of them bruising or inflamed in some way. He looked like he had fallen into a pit of snakes and taken one too many bites.

Sakura felt sick when she realized she probably wasn’t too off the mark with that guess.

“There’s a lot of venom, isn’t there?” she asked with growing dread. She hated how weak her voice sounded when she needed to it be strong for the patient, even if it was Shizune who was mainly treating the injuries.

Shizune’s face was white and tight with worry. “Hold him down. I have something that can extract it. Tsunade left it with me in case something like Haku ever happened again. Just hold him and wait.”

Sakura swallowed, but did as she was asked. She took Yamato’s better looking hand and squeezed it to let him know she was there more than anything else. He cracked open the only eye not bloated and turned his head enough to see her.

“You look terrible,” he chuckled weakly.

“You don’t look so hot yourself, buddy.”

“I’m always hot. What are you talking about,” he coughed, sounding thinner and thinner with every word until he sucked in a good gust of new air. His eye settled on her again. “What happened to you, Sakura?”

“Evil tree tried to eat me. They said it was probably Orochimaru, but you know… Is that what you were doing?”

Yamato looked confused for moment before coughing. Blood stained his lips. “He-he can’t manipulate trees. What are they talking about? That’s the whole reason he ended up making me. He couldn’t handle the Senju dna in his own body…that’s my reason for being, they said.” His eyelids started to drop and a wrinkle formed between his brows. “I’m the bastard Senju that can’t do anything perfect enough to be worth it.”

Sakura leaned in, holding his hand closer to her chest, heart skipping around in fear as he grew whiter and whiter. His skin was almost see through in parts. “Don’t worry about that. You’re amazing and I’m proud of you. Thank you for trying to keep us all safe. Thank you, you’re going to get better. I promise. You’ll get better.”

His lids lifted enough that she was sure he saw her. She inched closer and gripped his hand as tightly as she could with her good hand. He seemed halfway out of it and she wondered if he was even aware of what he was saying or hearing.

“Thank you for saving us. We appreciate you so much, Yamato.”

“No,” he breathed, eyes dropping again. “Not everyone...not anyone, just you. No one else even
says my name.” It seemed like such an effort when he looked up at her again. “Just you.”

“Th-that’s not true. Maybe the others don’t show or share it as much as they should, but you save us all, you protect us all. Even if they don’t know it, they’re thankful to you and I am so proud of you. I really am.”

She could hear how heavy his breathing was as he struggled to inflate and deflate his lungs. They sounded wet almost. She needed to get a stethoscope and check that-

“If it was just for you, it was worth it.”

Sakura blinked and looked up to his face, but he was on the edge of consciousness, eyes closed, likely unaware of what he was even saying.

Shizune came back into the room but Sakura hardly noticed. Yamato winced and grunted through the procedure, but Sakura didn’t let go of his hand, and he seemed to know that.
“You know that our uncle is gonna be pissed if he finds out what you said,” Shisui commented, watching as his cousin stalked ahead of him once they touched down.

Talking mid fight was possible but not suitable for when someone wanted to have a serious enough conversation that required reading body language. Shisui didn’t need to read Itachi’s body language, but his words felt empty without the reaction.

“Which one?” Itachi murmured dully, brushing the dust off his shoulders as his wings slipped out of space, folded into the shadows.

Shisui paused, thought on it, and shivered at the visual image. “Ah, yeah, Izuna is quite fearsome when he wants to be.”

It didn’t help things that Izuna had so few things he could actually be fearsome for. He cared for his family, but seemed to understand they were all powerful enough to stand on their own. Even when Sasuke had been hurt as a youngling, Izuna had never been moved to defend the boy or coddle him like he would when he was with Sakura during their appointment times. Sakura was the first person who stepped into Izuna’s world that he could treat in such a pampering way.

“I still think Madara is the scarier one. He’d chase us down the mountain if he got that angry, but Izuna wouldn’t be able to...Madara would just do it for him. Ugh, I’m not looking forward to that,” said Shisui.

“Agreed. He need not know.”

Shisui flapped his own wings once more before pulling them up and tucking them away. “Hey, yeah, but that doesn’t excuse you from, you know, doing the wrong thing. You crossed a line back there, and you still need to apologize for that.”

“We were pursuing all possible leads on an open investigation. I need not apologize for doing my job,” Itachi answered sharply.

Shisui reached out and grabbed a handful of black fabric and yanked Itachi back. Not expecting it, the younger Uchiha stumbled and Shisui was able to pull Itachi to the wall and pin him there.

“Asking invasive, embarrassing questions in front of others who are not your intimate is not your job! Hurting the girl you like when you’re embarrassed and don’t know what to say isn’t your job either. You got an ego my cousin, I do too. It’s an Uchiha thing we all have to deal with, but you don’t ever let it become an excuse for hurting others emotionally.”

There wasn’t a struggle as Itachi allowed himself to stay pinned up against the wall. Both cousins were caught in a stare that hurt to hold too long, and Itachi looked away first, ears going red. He swallowed and ducked his head, shifting on his feet while still remaining pinned by Shisui.

“I-I didn’t meant to embarrass.”

“Yeah, well you did. That Hyuga brat was watching and everything. I don’t care what you’ve heard from Pein or the others about her being a disenfranchised god that can cast personal barriers, we don’t assume anything. There are any number of reasons she could have not been able to defend
“My aim was not to imply any form of ...victim blaming,” Itachi whispered, face contorting at the words as if they were hard to hear in his own voice.

“Yeah, well you’re not the only one who wanted to know more about our cute new doctor, but there are better ways to go about it.” Shisui let go of Itachi and stepped back. “And for goodness sake, don’t jump to the stuff newlyweds ask.”

“I didn’t mean for it to come across like that!”

Shisui cracked a secret sort of smile. “Yeah, yeah, you can’t fool me. Don’t tell me you haven’t had your own sort of secret fantasies of our cute little doctor dressed all in white for you, church bells ringing for the service.”

Shisui leaned in with his arms crossed and grin wide, eyes flashing in delight as he saw his famously stoic cousin reduced to a simpering mess of red faced embarrassment that couldn’t string two words together without a stutter.

“She’d look terrific in white, I think,” Shisui pressed.

“Y-you’re teasing.”

“I’m sorry!” Shisui laughed. “My adorable straight laced cousin is getting this flustered about a fantasy of the girl he likes in a wedding dress. I mean, that’s a little too pure for a hot blooded male, don’t you think?”

Itachi’s flush abated and a look of indignance came over him. “No. Absolutely not.”

Shisui fitted his hands over his hips and tilted his head back to stare down his nose at his younger cousin who was also an inch or two shorter. “Hey, hey, we’re not hermits anymore. We can indulge our eyes enough to get past such over exaggerated reactions to such little things.”

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“Sakura in a wedding dress is not a little thing.”

Knowing their deep history as an all male family of hermits that used to view the mere sight of a female as an impure thing, it made sense that some of that tradition stuck to Itachi longer than others. But it had been centuries since their transmigration to Pompeii, and it was far too much fun to indulge in the sights and sounds of life among the people, regardless of their sex.

Some birds took to it faster than others, but Shisui liked to think he took to it fastest, even if Sasuke was the youngest to hatch. Sasuke could still be teased into a red faced mumbling mess with a few lewd suggestions easily enough, but for Itachi it was far rarer to see him perturbed.

It made Shisui want to be a little evil and see how far he could push this newly discovered emotional button on the other Uchiha. It wasn’t his fault it was this fun to see Itachi lose it over a few ideas and fewer words.

Shisui’s grin stretched wider. “Does her wedding dress come with a garter you envision removing?”

Itachi’s wings slipped out, Itachi’s concentration slipping. The bones from his back shivered and black feathers shook all around Itachi as he fisted both hands and tried to not let his imagination run much further.

“That is indecent to the unmarried lady,” Itachi hissed, sounding more like a whine as he glared up at
his cousin and folded his wings back, out of sight. “Aside from that, I don’t think Sakura herself would appreciate the sentiments.” Itachi straightened the front of his uniform and the flush ebbed away and control came back into his face. “Don’t repeat that sort of language around our uncles… or Sasuke.”

“You’re not going to warn me about Obito?”

Itachi’s reply was a simmering stare.

“Yeah,” Shisui amended. “You’re right, I wouldn’t.”

“Even you are not so dumb,” Itachi muttered, pushing ahead and walking into the main hallway ahead of Shisui. The soft footsteps that followed was clue enough that he followed.

“That would be terrible to see,” Shisui finally whispered as they passed another rice screen door. “Obito would chew my head off.”

“Obito would be right to chew you head off,” Itachi corrected with a raised brow.

The screen door to their immediate left rolled back with a smacking loud enough to freeze both boys in their tracks and stand wide eyed as Izuna looked down at the pair of them with dead black eyes.

“You two just got back from below?” Izuna asked coldly.

Shisui just swallowed while Itachi answered for the both of them. “Yes. We just returned.”

“What were you doing tonight? My birds have expressed great agitation for my doctor.”

Inwardly, Shisui cursed and forced his face to smile and appear as casual as ever while Itachi worked damage control with their uncle.

“She was partially involved, yes. We received a call from the Hyuga residence and were following up on it when we encountered Sakura inside a tree.”

“She was inside a tree?” Izuna asked, his black feathered bird flapping in agitation behind him before settling down into a perch on the Uchiha’s shoulder.

“Not when we arrived, but she had been inside it at one point, she was covered in its ichor and her wrist had been broken in the struggle. She’s well now, and returned home with her friends. We’re looking into how this might be connected to Orochimaru.”

“That bastard snake doesn’t contort the trees though,” Izuna hissed, voice dangerously sharp.

Neither male had missed the flash of red once Izuna heard about Sakura’s wrist breaking.

“His efforts have been thwarted by her involvement with the Haku boy’s curse treatment at one point. He has also been known to tamper with the Senju DNA. This could be a new element to his powers we are seeing tested.”

“The Senju are to blame in this,” Izuna hissed. “They should have dealt with the brat the day he showed his colors. Maybe then the snake wouldn’t have tampered with their damn DNA and created an abomination. The fact that to this day those matters are yet unresolved is appalling.”

“We’ll be meeting with them in the morning to follow up on this.”

Izuna reaching behind and smoothed down the feathers of the bird on his shoulder. “If they’re so
willing. They’ve been meaning to share information with us on Orochimaru since before the winter solstice.”

“We...did talk with them though,” Shisui started to say before catching Itachi’s look. “We just ended up agreeing to work separately and stay out of each other’s way.”

“This is still chiefly their fault. There is no excuse for their incompetence. Keeping Pompeii hidden and their federal bureau work don’t amount to much.”

Izuna started to turn back into his room and Itachi noticed there were several other birds perched around on various objects and pieces of furniture, all watching the pair oddly.

One bird held something in its beak and Itachi recognized it right away. The pink buds gave it away as a Sakura branch. Izuna paused in front of the bird and held out his hand to receive the twig. Itachi saw his uncle’s tight face ease and relax at the sight of the pink buds. It was a broken bit of something larger, but Izuna took it tenderly and treated it with care as he returned to the table set up for flower arranging. He was already working on a larger work, but kept the broken branch in a tray of water to nourish it.

“I’ll have this arrangement done in the morning if one of you wouldn’t mind depositing it at the clinic for Sakura. She’s far too soft for broken bones and this saddens me greatly.”

“We’ll drop it off in the morning,” Itachi said, bowing and excusing himself before Shisui.

Izuna waved them off, but his eyes didn’t leave the work he was busy with, picking through stems and stalks of flowers to arrange as beautifully as possible.

Sakura woke up on the edge of Yamato’s bed and the first thing she thought was actually how hot her wrist was. Sitting up she reached for the brace and started to unbuckle the different pieces and get a good look at the swollen area, but when she looked down the skin was pale and smooth, bearing no signs of breakage or distress. Sakura poked the area and winced. Still fractured at least, but compared to when she came into the clinic with it, the change was dramatic. She estimated that Shizune’s tea accelerated her natural healing by the first couple of weeks at least.

“How’s the good doctor feeling?”

Sakura looked up, eyes wide in surprise to see Yamato already awake and grinning down at her. “You’re awake! Oh, if I was snoozing on your bed you should have just told me. I didn’t mean to-I, ugh, sorry. You could have woken me if I was bothering you.”

“In what crazy world is it a bother to wake up and find out a pretty doctor’s been at your bedside the whole night because she cared a bit about you?” he joked, smile easy and eyes bright. “‘Sides, I thought it was cute.”

Sakura flushed easily from the compliment. “You must be feeling better.”

“Lots. I’m glad I decided to come in.”

“Decided?” Sakura snorted, sitting up straighter. “That was a decision you had to make? You looked terrible, like a snake pin cushion. Anyone in their right mind would have come straight to the medical
facilities with injuries like those.”

“When did I ever claim to be in the right mind?”

Sakura groaned, rolling her eyes and turning around in the chair she had originally dragged up to the bedside. She started to pull her brace back together and made a note to thank Shizune for talking her out of a cast. If her bones were going to heal at such a rapid rate, it wouldn’t be worth it to get out the plaster.

“How are you feeling?” Sakura asked without looking up from the straps as she pulled the brace back together.

“Fine. I knew I would if I could just sleep it off. It was just a bit uncomfortable for that little bit of time. I was fortunate he didn’t have any time to thread curses into his snakes. Regular bites don’t scare me.”

Sakura looked up and frowned. “You looked scary coming in.”

“Yeah, I guess so. There are punctures all over and-”

“Not like that,” Sakura interrupted. “You. I mean, your body was a mess and there is that, but it was you that scared me. It was almost like you didn’t care if you lived or died, like you decided to hold onto life on a whim or something. Do you remember what you said last night?”

“I said something?” Sakura frowned at his joking tone and his grin slid back into a neutral rest. “No, but I have a pretty good idea. Was it what I was thinking?”

“I don’t know, what were you thinking?” she asked.

Yamato shrugged. “I almost didn’t do it. I almost had it with the Senju and a part of me wanted to spite them and screw them over by not helping in the way only I could help. They wanted someone to do their dirty work and I was tired of getting my hands ruined in it.”

Sakura leaned back in the chair and nodded, listening more. Yamato glanced up at her as if to check she was listening before going on.

“I am not loved by the people of Pompeii. At best I am tolerated. You have a friend, Ino? Her relation Deidara is in a similar situation where he is not looked upon so kindly because of the same evil source. Not because we chose it, but because of bad luck we’re the wrong sort of different. I know this. There’s no way I couldn’t know this.”

Sakura felt a painful knot in her gut as the confession came out of Yamato. She wanted to tell him it wasn’t true, that it wasn’t as bad as he said it was. These were her friends he was talking about. She wanted to defend them, but she couldn’t.

“I move well in the dark, it’s where I was born. I do the dirty work so the Senju can keep their hands clean. I hate them. I wanted them to...I wanted to hurt them in some way, in a small rebellion. But I didn’t. I did as they asked and I hated myself for it in part. I’m still their dog. But I thought to myself after things were finished, that maybe if I just lay in the muck and let these things consume me, I won’t have to worry about being a dog anymore.”

“Yamato,” Sakura breathed, feeling a pain even sharper in her chest. She winced at the feel of it and leaned in towards his bed as if that closeness could help. She felt fear for him and a shard of her mind turned back to the memory of Sai. She wanted to fold him under her arm and keep him safe there until he was emotionally healed.
Yamato grinned at her again and it was less teasing, more somber. “But I didn’t. I dragged myself out of there just fine. I made the decision to drag myself here and get better because I think...even if it’s small, I think there is still some good I can do for some people still. Not all people, but...” He swallowed and looked at her more fully. “Did I tell you that? That it was because of you that I was able to do it. If the rest of Pompeii went to dust and ash, if you were still here it would still be worth it. It was because of you I found it in myself to finish the job, and then to come back out of the muck.”

Sakura felt at a loss for breath. It was hard to get words formed in her mouth when her brain was swimming with thoughts. “I’m so sorry you feel this way. I’m sorry. It’s not fair. You’ve done a lot, probably more than I know, and I’m so proud of you but it’s still not fair because it’s not enough.”

“It’s enough for me.” He shrugged when she glanced up. “For me at least, it’s enough. You said you were proud of me. It’s all I need.”

Sakura was silent for a long while, reeling in the knowledge that her friend nearly didn’t come back to her. As close as she was to losing her life last night, Yamato was just as close, maybe closer.

“Damn,” she whispered, shaking her head. “I never knew Pompeii would be this crazy.”

“Just don’t leave it.”

She slouched down across the end of his cot and grinned up at him from the bed sheets. “Not anytime soon. No plans for that.”

Shizune came in to check in on them and gave Sakura more of that nasty tea before insisting that the two of them be broken up for proper recovery time. It was early afternoon when the guests came.

“Hashirama,” Sakura greeted in surprise as she stood up from behind her desk and tugged on her lab jacket with her good hand. She noted his suit and tie as well as the similar manner of dress his younger brother sported as he stepped through. “And Tobirama. What brings the both of you to the clinic?”

Both tipped their heads in greeting and smiled easily, but it was Hashirama who spoke first.

“Good afternoon, Sakura. We wanted to check in on you and see how you were doing after last night. We were so sorry to hear you were hurt.”

Tobirama’s eyes were oddly fixated on the brace she tried to keep mostly obscured behind the drape of her lab coat. He blinked once, as if remembering himself and shifted his gaze up to meet hers.

“You are doing better, aren’t you?” he asked, sounding unsure of himself.

“Oh, of course.” She waved her good hand in front of her face. “I’ll be just fine in a few weeks I think. Um, is there something else I could help you with, or are you here for something else? Itachi said he would be talking to you.”

“We met this morning before coming here. They filled us in on recent events,” Hashirama said. “I can’t begin to imagine how frightened you must have been, so it was important that we rush over and put you at ease.”

“Oh?” Sakura glanced between the two of them. She bit back her sarcasm.

“It’s been our goal and aim these past few months to neutralize and deal with the problem that you know as Orochimaru. It wasn’t our intention to let knowledge of him spread or come to you until we could be sure we had dealt with him.”
“I think I found out well enough on my own, regardless of whether I wanted to or not.”

“Yes, I agree.” Hashirama chuckled, sounding like he was used to placating.

Hashirama was a bright and kind person, but Sakura had the feeling that while he was kind and good natured, he lacked respect for her, or at least enough respect to be upfront and honest with her.

“But you can rest easy now, it was a last ditch effort for survival that spilled over into last night’s events. We were quite busy with a number of other occurrences across Pompeii’s boundaries. And there are still a number of other trees that are behaving...oddly, it’s been linked to Orochimaru’s failed research.”

“Are you positive?” Sakura asked.

“Of course.”

Sakura’s gut told her otherwise.

“Brother, there was that other matter you wished to discuss,” Tobirama interjected, laying a hand on his brother’s shoulder.

Sakura caught the way Hashirama’s smile flinched. The elder Senju whispered something to his brother before glancing sideways at the only closed door in the clinic.

“Shizune informed us we have a patient here. Would you allow us to see him so that we may speak privately with him before leaving?”

Sakura didn’t want to, but she nodded. “I’m not discharging anyone today, but I’ll check to see if he’s awake and up to having visitors. Wait here,” she said before slipping away.

She didn’t have to say much, since it was clear Yamato had heard everything from his room. His hearing was that much better than hers.

“You can send them in. I knew I would need to talk to them after this. I should tell them I’m leaving after this. I don’t know where, but I’m moving out from the Senju lands and their...protection.”

“Do you know where you will go?” Sakura asked in a whisper.

When Yamato shrugged her mind was made up.

“There are two other rooms on the second floor of this building. One is locked and neither I nor Shizune have a key to it. The other is filled with junk. You are welcome to the second room. It’s yours if you want it.”

Sakura walked out before he could protest and waved the two Senju in before returning to her seat behind the desk, where files needed to be read and sorted.

On the threshold Tobirama hung back and turned slightly back. “Sakura.” His voice was so light she thought she didn’t hear it at first, but looked up regardless to see him staring down at her. “I’m very glad you are well. I was terribly distress when I learned you were injured.”

“Thanks for that, and for what you already do. I appreciate it.”

Tobirama lingered in the doorway a second longer than a heartbeat before ducking his head and going inside. The door shut behind him and Sakura felt something like a weight slide off her shoulders. It was easier to breath now and she hadn’t realized how suffocated she had felt in their
presence. Maybe it was the suits.

Sakura made herself some more tea and drank it greedily.

Not five minutes later she heard someone come into the clinic and she stepped out of the workroom to see a beautifully arranged flower piece that looked professionally done. Her heart ached for the bursts of partially opened pink peonies wreathed by white yarrow buds. There were several other types of flowers accenting the peonies but Sakura tore her eyes away from the cluster to the man behind it.

“That’s awfully fast, Itachi. Didn’t I see you just yesterday.”

She looked behind him and saw Shisui hanging out on the steps outside, chilling while leaning against the railing.

Odd.

“Sakura. These are for you. Izuna arranged them and said he was concerned for the wellbeing of his favorite doctor.” Itachi lowered the display so that he could look over it. “The peonies are meant to symbolize healing, I believe.”

“I must be super popular today. It’s not even two in the afternoon and I’ve been visited this much,” she joked. “Thanks for stopping by though. Are you coming from meeting with the Senju brothers?”

“We are. It was helpful to share information and be brought up to speed on their efforts to track down Orochimaru. They appear...competent. As we understand it, Orochimaru has been neutralized and last night’s attack was a result of those efforts.”

“Yeah, that’s what Hashirama said.”

Itachi held out the flowers to her and Sakura accepted them with her good hand before setting them down on a table where they would be admired. They really were expertly arranged. It felt nice to be treated.

“Sakura.”

She looked up from staring at the flowers and noticed Itachi had moved much closer, less than an arm’s reach away now.

He started to dip his head and Sakura took a step back on reflex, only to feel silly as Itachi folded into a deep bow (that wasn’t a kiss at all).

“Please forgive me my foolishness in the unkind comment I made. It was not my intention to be callous with my words. I humbly beg your forgiveness.”

Sakura reached out and touched his shoulder, urging him to stand up. “It’s fine, don’t get all bent out of shape for it. I...I understand you have a job to do, you were trying to work. But yeah, thank you for apologizing. I feel better hearing that, and yes, I forgive you. Alright?”

“It’s...more than that, we prided ourselves on being protectors and yet we didn’t…” Itachi swallowed and Sakura was surprised to see the Uchiha struggle with his words. It seemed difficult for Itachi to say what he wanted, to find the perfect words that fit just right. “We didn’t know you were in such danger.”

“Yeah, well, that happens. And I don’t want to encourage any ideas of maybe you need to be
stalkers from here on out, because I do like my privacy. But if you could keep an extra eye on the forest, I still don’t trust it.”

“Of course.” Itachi tugged at his uniform. “I will be returning to patrol with Shisui now. If you need us, the birds will inform us.”

Sakura nodded and waved as he made his way out and disappeared with Shisui. She watched them go, but turned back to her tea and sipped at what was left, dreading the time later that day when she would have to drink Shizune’s tea for her bones. Lemongrass with honey was far more delightful to drink.

She had finished and was washing out her cup in the sink when she heard the door to Yamato’s room open. She stepped out, ready to say goodbye to the two Senju brothers, but couldn’t catch sight of either of them. They had both left. Turning around she saw Yamato standing in the doorway, looking emotionally worn out and physically tired.

He looked up at her and smiled thinly. “So...you said something about a spare room?”
Sakura cursed softly as she fumbled with the dish, catching it with mitted hands. It had been a while since she last cooked a casserole and she could almost feel her grandmother cackling from behind her, laughing at her lack of grace. That’d never been a problem for Sayuri Haruno, who’d traveled in a circus act as a trapeze artist before settling down, but she’d never faulted Sakura for her shortcomings.

Sakura shook free of her thoughts, balancing the casserole between one hand and her hip as she knocked on the door next to her own.

She heard a loud thump and a few colorful words before the door was cracked open and a suspicious brown eye peeked out. Upon seeing her, Yamato’s countenance changed entirely, lighting up from within as he flung the door open.

“Sakura.”

Sakura shivered slightly, unused to the affection instilled within the single word. “Hey Yamato,” she greeted before thrusting the casserole out in front of her. “I made chicken divan.”

For a moment, he looked confused. Then he brightened, smile heartbreakingly happy. “For me?”

“A little housewarming gift,” Sakura said, returning his infectious smile. “Just a little way for me to welcome you to the neighborhood.”

“I’ve never had a neighbor before,” Yamato said, taking the too hot dish in his bare hands. Sakura bit back an exclamation, seeing the way he moved on unaffected. “I think I’m going to enjoy it though.”

“So, will you do your neighbor the honor of a house tour?” Sakura asked, peering over his shoulders. “I want to see what you’ve done with the place.”

“It isn’t much,” he warned, stepping away from the door and into the apartment itself. It was laid out almost as a mirror image to Sakura’s own apartment though it was far more sparse and Spartan in style. There weren’t really any personal, familial touches other than the exquisite tree that took up a good portion of the living room. Sakura approached it a bit warily, the familiar throb of her wrist an echoing warning.

The tree seemed to grow from the very floorboards, a smooth transition that Sakura could barely even see. However, as it grew taller, Sakura saw vertical stripes of reds, greens, purples, and dappled blues. She pressed a tentative hand to the tree, starting at its warmth. It seemed to thrum beneath her hand, a living, vibrant thing. It was Yamato, his strength, his kindness, his-
kitchen, cheeks flushed with heat. His expression was miserable. “I am sorry about that,” he said, shoulders slumped. He looked like he was preparing for her to hit him or something. “That’s...that’s an extension of me. It’s sort of a necessity.” Yamato looked up at her, eyes desperate. “I’m sorry for damaging the floor and this lovely apartment. I’ll pay all the damages just don’t make me leave-”

“Leave?” Sakura said, cutting through his growing panic. “I’m not going to make you leave. This space is yours to do with as you please. I happen to like the tree. It’s quite nice.” Sakura wondered for a moment if she said something wrong as his blush deepened as he stared down at his toes. She pushed forward, grabbing his hand in hers because he needed to understand this. “I’m not here as your landlord or minder. I’m your friend. If something bothers me, sure, I’ll let you know but we can work through it. I’m not going to kick you out without warning or punish you for doing something you need to survive. Do you understand?”

Yamato blinked a few times before nodding. “Yeah,” he said, voice rough. “Yeah, I get it. Thanks.”

Sakura watched him for a few moments more, waiting to see if the panic set in again. When it didn’t, she squeezed his hand and released it. “It smells like...is that eucalyptus?”

He nodded. “Eucalyptus degupta, the rainbow eucalyptus,” he said meekly.

Sakura grinned and said, “Now, want to have some dinner and come over to my apartment to watch a movie?”

She turned and flounced away toward the kitchen before he responded, oblivious to the wondrous look on Yamato’s face.

He wasn’t sure how long he stood there, just watching her, but when he came back to himself, he looked around. Dark birds lined the rail of the balcony, peering in with beady, cold eyes. Yamato frowned and pulled the blinds closed.

Let the Uchiha think whatever they wanted, this moment was his.

“Sakura!” Naruto whined, pouting up at her with bright, bright eyes.

Sakura sighed, pressing the thermometer into his open mouth. “What’s got you so worked up, Naruto?” she asked.

Naruto was perhaps her most faithful client as he had the tendency to be a hypochondriac. Any scrape, big or small saw him to her clinic. From what she gathered from Kushina and Minato, Naruto wasn’t this way until she rolled into town. Sakura was inclined to take that information with a grain of salt as it came up in a conversation that involved herself, one of the twins, and grandchildren.

“I’m tired,” Naruto said after the thermometer beeped.

Sakura pulled it away, glancing down at the temperature and shaking her head wryly. As always, Naruto ran at 113.6° Fahrenheit. “You’re tired?” she repeated. “Could you expound upon that a bit?”

“I get really sleepy every time I go outside. Not right away but I realize a few hours later that I’m exhausted. Mito-sama’s got me out in the field now and it’s exhausting. It wasn’t this bad last year or the years before!”

Sakura frowned slightly. “You know, it could have something to do with the changing seasons. Are
you noticing any other symptoms?”

“My eyes are getting pretty itchy and watery,” Naruto said.

“It might be an allergy thing. Maybe a response to the coming of Spring?”

“But it’s never happened before,” Menma said, speaking up for the first time.

“And he’s experiencing it too,” Naruto put in.

“Well, maybe new flora was introduced into the environment,” Sakura said. “Maybe when they burned the tree for the ceremony.”

The brothers exchanged glances and shrugged.

“That was around the time we started getting tired,” Naruto said.

Sakura nodded, writing a few things down. “I’m going to suggest you pick up an antihistamine from the pharmacy.” When she was met with blank stares, she smiled and shook her head. “Sorry. Any generics of Benadryl should be fine. Try taking them twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. They will make you sleepier for the first few weeks, but they should combat the allergy symptoms. Stop back by if they don’t work.”

“Thanks Sakura,” Naruto said, hopping to his feet. “You going to the InoShikaCho Bash on Friday?”

Sakura wrinkled her nose in thought. “Is that the party that Ino’s parents are hosting?”

“Them, the Nara, and the Akimichi,” Menma said, straightening from his slouched position to lean in close to Sakura with a roguish grin. “Their parties are legendary.”

Naruto laughed, digging his elbow into his brother’s ribs. “Give her some space, asshole. Menma is right though, their parties are the best. With the Akimichi’s amazing food, the Nara’s wit, and the Yamanaka’s impeccable taste, it’s basically the perfect party.”

“You guys have a lot of parties here in Pompeii,” Sakura said. “It’s basically every other weekend at least!”

“We’ve had centuries to cultivate these traditions,” Menma said with a shrug. “With such long-lived lives, why wouldn’t we celebrate?”

Sakura nodded. “Be that as it may, I unfortunately won’t be able to make the party on Friday. I have some paperwork to catch up on.”

“Take a break!” Naruto exclaimed, slinging an arm around her shoulder as they made their way to the front office.

“Cute,” Sakura said, shrugging out from beneath his weight. “Truly though, I can’t go this weekend. You can’t convince me otherwise; Ino’s already tried.”

Naruto pouted at her and Sakura averted her eyes, knowing better than to allow herself to be suckered in. She needed some time this weekend for herself. She felt like she’d been pouring herself out for others and Sakura needed a chance to recuperate. It was hard to remember the finiteness of her body at times; the burn in her lungs, the ache of her bones, the stretch of her muscles. She only had so much to give.
And at times, she found she gave far too much.

Sakura sometimes worried she’d keep giving and giving until she was just a bundle of scattered parts, offered off to those who needed it more.

So yes, she was firm in her rejection.

There had to be boundaries.

Sakura feared what she’d become otherwise.

(What she’d been before.)

Menma watched her as she set the date for their follow-up, eyes keen and too wise for Sakura’s comfort. “Well,” he said, grabbing the scruff of Naruto’s neck as they prepared to leave. “We will miss you. Try not to overtax yourself this weekend.”

Sakura’s smile softened from the angry, weeping slash to something calmer, more genuine. “Thanks Menma. I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

“I’m sure we’ll see you before then,” Menma replied, slouching into his brother in a way that was just shy of intentional as he nudged him toward the door. “Catch you later, Sakura.”

“Bye Sakura!” Naruto said, smile all sunshine now.

Sakura waved them off before sinking into her seat with a deep sigh. Shizune was out, restocking their supplies. She didn’t say it outright, but Sakura knew she was working with Tsunade on a variety of potions “just in case.” They weren’t “just in case” potions though, not really. Sakura wasn’t sure why Shizune wouldn’t say it outright, if it was in deference to the animosity Tsunade felt toward Sakura or a fear that Sakura would order her to stop.

Sakura would never interfere with something so vital to the community.

The office was therefore quiet and Sakura turned her eyes to the flowers Izuna arranged for her, smiling. They were beginning to wilt, but they were still as magnificent as they were when Itachi delivered them. Sakura’s mouth firmed.

Itachi.

He’d stepped way out of bounds when he questioned her a few days ago. Still, Sakura couldn’t help but wonder how many others wanted to ask those exact same questions and more but found themselves bound by propriety.

How many people doubted her?

She knew she was the outsider. When push came to shove, Sakura would be the first one on the chopping block. It wasn’t intentional or malicious by any means, but her bonds here were shallow and superficial in comparison to the centuries that wove these people together. Sakura wished she could say she wasn’t used to the feeling but she was.

Sakura was never first for anyone.

Sakura shook her head roughly, refusing to get caught up in the vicious cycle of negativity once more. Instead, she stood and turned the sign on the door to closed. There was only fifteen or so more minutes until she was technically supposed to do so.
She headed out the side door to the back of the complex and stepped into the garage. Sakura never thought she’d have reason to use the garage for anything other than additional storage but, as she opened the door to the Camaro, she couldn’t help the little thrill that lifted her heart.

Sakura slid with practiced ease into the driver’s seat, gingerly placing her hands against the steering wheel. She didn’t crank the car. She never did.

It wasn’t hers, despite the title that named it so. She refused to keep the gift, for that was what it was. And it was a gift she didn’t deserve, one she couldn’t repay. Sakura knew Pein didn’t expect anything in return, just as she knew that the novelty of her existence would be worn away by time and leave only Sakura.

And only Sakura didn’t get free cars.

Instead, she sat there, inhaling the scent of warm leather and relaxing. Sakura rolled down the window, closing her eyes as the breeze wafted against her face. Briefly, everything was perfect.

“Dear girl, what are you doing?”

Sakura jumped, legs ramming into the steering wheel that was bound to leave bruises. She looked around wildly, frowning as she found nothing. She grabbed the nazar from her pocket, tapping it over both eyes before looking around once more.

Nothing.

“Who are you?” Sakura asked, taking the ankh from her pocket and placing it around her neck for additional protection. The knife Sai gave her was tucked into her back pocket and she inched her hand that direction.

“The mortals have assigned me the name Fujin,” he replied, voice rasping.

“God of the wind,” Sakura muttered, incrementally relaxing back into the red leather. Her fingers wrapped tightly around the knife, ready for anything. She wasn’t sure how well she’d do against a god, but she would try. “What brings you out this way?”

“Many things awaken during the Ceremony for Spring,” Fujin replied. “Things that hibernate habitually during the winter and…others.”

“Which are you?” Sakura asked.

The breeze kicked up into a wind with a rumble, ruffling her hair. “You seem an intelligent one. I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

Sakura bounced on the balls of her feet, glancing up at the line. It hadn’t moved at all. She sighed, turning her attention back to her phone. From the disjointed, rambling texts Naruto was sending her, it seemed that his tiredness had led to a full on viral infection that afflicted nearly everyone at the grocery store, leaving poor Konohamaru to man the only open register. It was a Friday afternoon and the store was quite busy.

“Quite a line,” a voice said behind her.

Sakura turned, blinking as she met the cool gaze of Danzo Shimura. He was looking at her like he
couldn’t quite place her so she said, “Sakura Haruno. It is a long line, isn’t it?”

“Ah, the resident doctor,” he said with a nod. “I am Danzo Shimura. I apologize for not stopping by your clinic yet, I’ve been quite busy with all of the celebrations.” His voice was fondly exasperated. “You played one of the heroes during Founder’s Day, did you not?”

Sakura grinned. “Indeed I did.”

They shuffled forward in line before Danzo said, “You’ve caused a stir here in Pompeii.”

Sakura glanced askance at him, trying to read what he thought of that. His face was impassive, however, and his eyes flinty. “I suppose so. The residents here can be a bit rambunctious so I’m sure they were excited to have someone in town to treat their wounds.”

“You have made a strong impression,” Danzo said, smile turning wry. “Minato has yet to stop singing your praises during town meetings. Many of the clan leaders do the same.”

Sakura flushed, glancing down at her cart. “I can only hope I’m doing my job half as well as they say I am.”

“I’m sure you are,” Danzo said softly. “I will need to stop by soon and find out for myself.” He looked past her for a moment. “Thank you for keeping me company while we waited.”

Sakura turned, fumbling with her cart as she realized that she was at the front of the line. She faced Danzo once more, offering him her hand. “It’s been a pleasure getting to know you, Danzo.”

He took her hand, shaking it firmly. “Dr. Haruno, I believe the pleasure was mine.”

Sakura gathered her groceries as Konohamaru rang her up, loading them into the bags she brought with her. It was her turn to cook tonight and Sakura decided she wanted to be a little fancy with it. She and Yamato had fallen into the habit of eating dinner together two or three times a week. It was nice to spend her evenings quietly, whiling them away in pleasant company.

The dinners were a good distraction from Sakura’s mounting frustration at the general incompetence of the people around her. They still rarely worked together, relying on their familial pride to keep them going. All of them, however, believed that Orochimaru was the culprit behind the attacks. Sakura wasn’t nearly so sure. It was made even worse in the way that they tried to keep Sakura out of the loop, all in the name of “protecting” her.

Thankfully, she had a plan.

A tantalizing scent caught her attention, dashing all fleeting thoughts of espionage and heroism. Sakura turned slightly, surprised that she hadn’t noticed the large tree she was walking beneath. She’d taken a new path today, trying to familiarize herself with every aspect of the town. Unlike most other denizens of the town, Sakura didn’t have the song of Pompeii stirring in her blood or etched across her bones. She wanted to though.

She wanted it more than anything.

Then, maybe, Pompeii could truly be her home and she could be at peace with herself, surrounded by the family marked out for her by the town.

Maybe.

She hadn’t realized that there was a veritable orchard just on the outskirts of downtown. Ripe apples
hung low and heavy, ladening the branches. They lined the sidewalks, not seeming to belong to any of the nearby houses or apartment complexes. Sakura juggled her bags, fumbling for a moment, before stretching out a hand and taking a few of the apples.

Sakura dropped them in her bags, counting the ingredients in her head. She grinned.

Tonight, Yamato would get to try her green apple pie.

She paused for a moment, leaning against one of the trees and inhaling deeply. The fragrant fresh smell of the apples surrounded her and for a brief moment Sakura could simply be. She looked skyward, enjoying the view of the brilliant blue sky through twisting, gnarled branches. Sakura didn’t know how long she stood there, just breathing deep and feeling the way the air filled her lungs, until something caught her eye.

Further down, on the edge of where her vision went blurry, was another fruit tree. It was a different tree, with flowering pink buds on the fringe branches. Some, however, were burdened with heavy, fat peaches. They were rather pretty peaches, all oranges and reds amongst a veritable sea of green. The tree stood out too, as the only peach tree among the apples.

Sakura frowned thoughtfully and stepped in its direction.

“Yo.”

Sakura flinched as Sai appeared at her side, dropping down from one of the apple trees.

“Sai,” she said, unable to keep the reproach out of her voice. He just looked at her, juices running down the corners of his mouth as he bit into an apple. She sighed, feeling almost fond. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Do you like the knife?” he asked, cutting through all of the social niceties. Sakura was almost certain he didn’t even notice them. Her heart ached a bit at the thought.

“I do. Where in the world did you get it? It’s been so handy,” Sakura said.

He shrugged but Sakura caught the way his eyes flickered away from her. So he was keeping secrets from her. Charming.

Sakura began to walk, winding her way back to her apartment. She was unsurprised as he fell into step beside her. Their walk was silent but from the grimace hidden at the edges of Sai’s mouth and eyes, that wasn’t on purpose. She decided to be gracious and extend an olive branch of sorts.

“Here, take these bags,” Sakura said, plopping a few of her bags into Sai’s empty arms. He caught them easily, though his expression could only be called befuddled. “If you’re joining me for dinner, you have to help out.”

“What are you cooking?” he asked.

“Tuna steak with roasted purple potatoes,” Sakura replied. “I’m making apple pie for dessert.”

“I’m not a good cook,” Sai said. “And, from the last time I was at your house, it seems that you aren’t the best either.”

Sakura snorted, checking him with her hip before continuing on. She didn’t take offense to the comment.
After all, though he was oblivious to it, Sai was smiling.

That first dinner together set something of a tradition among the three. Every time she and Yamato had dinner Sai would slink in through the locked window, dropping into an unoccupied seat. Usually he brought treats or side dishes purchased from one of the many restaurants downtown. On one memorable occasion, Sai brought a dish of misshapen, slightly singed chocolate chip cookies. Neither she nor Yamato commented on the ashy taste.

Sakura had five.

So Sakura was surprised when a knock sounded at her door. Sakura and Yamato exchanged glances before Yamato shrugged.

“Maybe he’s learned some manners since his last visit,” he said, though he didn’t sound all that convinced.

Sakura threw open the door, breath catching on a laugh. It quickly fell away as she met the eyes of the person.

“Kimimaro,” she greeted, eying him curiously. “What brings you here this evening?”

Kimimaro cleared his throat, tucking his hands into his billowing sleeves. He had traded his lab coat for a haori. With his unbound hair, Kimimaro appeared ageless.

“I find that I have been remiss in my neighborly duties. I would be honored if you and Yamato joined me a few nights from today for dinner. Would Friday work?”

“Friday should be fine by me,” Sakura said. “Yamato—” She glanced back to him, startled to find that he’d silently moved to her side. She thought she’d be better used to this now with Yamato and Sai constantly in and out of her apartment. “Yamato, how about you?”

Yamato’s face was placid, but his eyes were hard as he stared Kimimaro down. “I’m available,” he said, leaning against the door frame.

Sakura watched him for a moment, trying to figure out what the issue was. She decided to ignore the unspoken tension in the air, turning her attention back to Kimimaro and looking at him expectantly. “Is there anything you’d like us to bring?”

Kimimaro shook his head, smile soft. “Your company is more than enough.” He looked to Yamato and in his eyes was a challenge. “I will eagerly await your visit at 7:00.” With a slight bow, Kimimaro turned and headed down the stairs.

“How’d he get in?” Yamato asked, shutting the door. “I thought the door downstairs was locked.”

“I probably forgot,” Sakura replied through a flicker of unease. She always locked the door. “In any case, I’m sure he could’ve gotten in just as Sai does.”

“Sai has no understanding of society. Kimimaro understands far too much. He has no excuse.”

Yamato’s voice was firm and unyielding.

Sakura shrugged, retaking her seat. “You can ask him on Friday if you please. My only request is that you leave me out of any of the passive-aggressive neighborly antics you choose to get up to.”
His eyes lit with interest.

“What are these antics of which you speak?” a new voice asked.

Sakura looked between Sai and Yamato for a moment before shaking her head and digging into her chicken divan. “If you two really want inspiration, you can go by the library or look it up.”

From their twin looks of determination, Sakura knew that they were going to take her up on that.

Sakura mentally sent up a prayer for her sanity, hoping it didn’t go to any god she knew personally as she prepared herself for what she was about to say. “Sai,” Sakura began, treading carefully. “Yamato and I have something for you.”

Sai cocked his head, watching them blandly. “A gift? Am I obligated to ‘return the favor.’”

“What books has Hiruzen given you?” Sakura asked. “No, you aren’t required to return the favor. Just…well here.”

Sai took the envelope from her and opened it quickly and efficiently, only for his hands to still when he found the contents. She saw a slight tremor run through his body and Sakura feared the misstep.

“These are keys to your home?” Sai asked.

“Well, to mine,” Yamato said, scratching his cheek. “I figured, with how often you’re over, it’d only make sense for you to have a key. You’re basically my roommate already.”

“We can get a bed set up for you,” Sakura said nervously. “There’s that smaller room you stay in sometimes as it is. It’d be easy to get it all fixed up—”

Sai abruptly stood and Sakura shut her mouth. He looked between them for a long time, face unreadable. Then he lunged, awkwardly throwing his limbs across their shoulders and drawing them close to him. He pat them once, twice, and released them, watching them anxiously.

“That is a hug,” Sai said. “The books say they are given to express gratitude and affection. Did I do it right?”

Sakura’s laugh was high and free as she grabbed him once more and pulled him and Yamato close. “Almost,” she said. “It just needs to last a little longer.”
Sakura placed her dreamcatcher downstairs, looking around guiltily as she did so. She knew that her friends would have a quite a bit to say about what she was about to attempt. Sakura covered the dreamcatcher with a sheet, hoping that her recklessness would pay off. It was a gamble, but for the answers she sought, it would be more than worth it.

Sakura climbed the stairs to her apartment once more, blinking as she saw Sai sitting outside her front door. He hadn’t been there five minutes prior, but Sakura was becoming accustomed to the abrupt comings and goings of those around her. Time and manners worked differently in Pompeii than they did in New York and she had to remember that.

“Hi Sai,” she said, pushing open the front door as he stood. “What brings you my way tonight?”

“Yamato and your neighbor are bickering again,” he said as he pushed past her, seeking the haven of her couch. He curled himself up there and watched her with unblinking, doleful eyes.

“Again?” Sakura repeated. She moved into the kitchen, rummaging through her drawers and grabbing a melatonin tablet. She chewed it, grimacing. It was just as well that Sai had arrived. Sakura was too keyed up for sleep at the moment. She might as well bake. “Have they been fighting often?”

She paused in her search, thinking. “They did just fine at dinner the other night. It was awkward, but neighborly dinners often are.”

“Ours are not,” Sai pointed out. “They are conversing outside from their balconies. It seemed tense. Perhaps I misunderstood. You mentioned having dinner with them. Perhaps it is part of a specialized mating ritual?”

Sakura choked on the handful of chocolate chips she’d popped into her mouth. Coughing, tears streaming from her eyes, she pounded at her chest and finally managed in a weak voice, “Somehow I don’t think that’s the case,” before devolving into giggles.

Sai entered the room, silent as always, crouching by her side. “Have I said something amusing?” he asked, seeming lost.

Sakura gasped for air and patted his hand as best she could. “Where have you been all my life? I have to keep you around!”

Sai cocked his head though Sakura thought she saw the slightest of smiles tucked away at the corners of his lips. “I accept,” he replied. “Is it alright if I stay the night here? I do not wish to interrupt Yamato. This courting ceremony is obviously important to him.”

Sakura sobered a bit, remembering the night she had planned. “You’re welcome to stay, Sai, though I’m not sure if it’ll be much quieter here.”

“Why not?”

“I believe I’m going to have nightmares tonight,” Sakura replied.
“Would you like me to wake you?” Sai asked, looking uncertain.

Sakura’s smile warmed as she looked at him. “Thank you for the offer, but no. I have some questions I need answered.”

Sai simply nodded, not asking questions as he followed her around the kitchen. He remained her silent but stalwart companion as she began to prepare lemon squares. Sai took directions in the kitchen gracefully and Sakura appreciated his presence as she worked through her jitters. The lemon squares could be taken down to the clinic tomorrow too. Sakura knew that a few of the clients would appreciate the homemade treat.

Sakura took a seat on the couch as the lemon squares baked, feeling the melatonin drag down against her eyelids. She was tired, even without the melatonin in her system.

“Go to sleep,” Sai said, pulling her to her feet. “I’ll take care of the lemon squares.”

“Thanks, Sai,” Sakura replied through her yawn. “You’re the best.”

She stumbled through her nightly habits before falling into bed, right as the timer in the kitchen dinged.

Sakura stood upon a chessboard, unable to protest as a ghostly hand, unattached to a body, moved her forward a space. She could feel the eyes, crawling across her skin, invading her boundaries. She was a pawn. Sakura stared up at the knight a few spaces away, its gaze unseen but still piercing.

Sakura felt taken apart, judged and found wanting.

She was powerless.

A scream rent the air and Sakura turned her eyes, catching sight of another pawn as it fell beneath the crushing weight of a rook. The sound of breaking bones was sickening, even more so when Sakura caught sight of the pawn’s face.

It was her.

“A pity,” a voice said. Sakura opened her mouth to scream against the pain of the voice, beyond male or female, ageless and all powerful. Yet nothing came out of her throat, she was drowning, choking on her own incompetence, her inability- “Let us try once more.”

The hand grasped Sakura once more and again she moved forward another space. Sakura could see the white knight more clearly as he lifted his sword, running a whetstone against the edge. It was looking at her, warning her of what was to come. She was next, she was just a pawn, she was nothing-

NO.

Sakura took a deep breath, centering herself as she closed her eyes against the terror pressing down on her. This was a dream. She was not a pawn, she was so much more.

She would not be controlled.

Sakura opened her eyes again, muscles tensing, straining against whatever it was that held her still. She saw the knight begin to move her way in that all too familiar l-shape, both hands raising its sword. Sakura could see her reflection in the sword, her pale drawn face and determined eyes.
As the sword came down, Sakura sprung forward, ducking around the knight. She felt the sword pass closely over her head, ruffling her hair with the force of it. But she was already away, sprinting toward the end of the board. Dream physics still applied as the board stretched out across the horizon, too long for her to even see the end. However, Sakura had the power here and her steps ate up the ground beneath her. She could hear the enraged yells of the entity behind her and of the other pieces on the board, but Sakura didn’t mind them.

She just had to make it to the end.

And suddenly she was there, staring down the wizened white king. It sat upon a regal throne but its body was deteriorating. It had lost its power, though it still wore the mantle of king. It was a sad thing, less than human dressed in the trappings of royalty and prestige. Sakura stepped up to it, shoving the king back against the throne, the knife Sai had given her materializing in her hands.

“I may have been a pawn,” Sakura said, pressing the knife against the king’s throat. She was addressing the entity as a whole, the thing in the forest that taunted and harassed her from the shadows. “But I have won your little game and I make the rules now.” She drew the knife across the king’s throat, ignoring the golden ichor that flowed down its lily white skin and the way it coated her hands. There was an ear-piercing shriek as Sakura lifted the crown from the king’s head, a weighty, gaudy thing. The ichor flowed onto the crown, turning it gold. Sakura could feel her ears ringing, bleeding as the entity bellowed against her. She placed the crown upon her head. “I’m the motherfucking king here.”

Sakura was ripped away from the board as an overload of images bombarded her. She saw the heroes of old, the sacrifice to the volcano, an old, angry anguish beating against her chest. They would pay; all of them would pay. She would not stop until Pompeii was ashes around her…

The scene shifted and suddenly she was in a fragrant garden, surrounded by trees of all kinds. Pears, peaches, pomegranates, and more hung ripe and heavy from the branches. Sakura reached out toward the trees, unbearably hungry…

It was dark, quiet. In the flicker of moonlight that shone through the thicket, Sakura could make out a small shrine. It came up about to Sakura’s hip. It was covered in moss and various other flora, little bluebells growing alongside it. There was a small plaque at the front of the smooth shrine, though the words were worn away by time. Sakura knelt by it, a solemnity in her heart that wasn’t there prior. She closed her eyes, bowing over the shrine.

“How could you?”

Sakura woke with a gasp, sweat slicking her skin. She sat up, glancing down at her fingers. They were clean. It had all been a dream.

Sakura exhaled heavily, flinging her arm across her eyes. She laid there for a few long moments, waiting for her heart rate to calm.

Finally she sat up, scrubbing her eyes.

It was time to get her dreamcatcher, though Sakura had a strong suspicion that the entity from the forest wouldn’t be bothering her any time soon.

One thing she knew for sure, it wasn’t Orochimaru.
“Are you joining me or not?” Sakura demanded, tucking the omamori behind the hamsa that hung around her neck. Sakura carried multiple talismans, nearly twenty in all, placed strategically around her body. Some were gifts, others were purchases from the Goblin Market. She had to be prepared. Sakura turned to the book expectantly. “Well?”

This is a bad idea, it replied, shaking its pages in her direction in a rueful manner.

“I know,” Sakura said, pulling her hair into a ponytail. “However, I need some answers and no one has been forthcoming. So I need to find them for myself. I’m going out into the forest with or without you. I’d much prefer for you to be there with me.”

I don’t like this, the book said, snapping shut in anger.

“I know you don’t and I know that I might get myself into even more trouble,” Sakura said, methodically wrapping her knuckles with bandage. She tried a few strikes, bouncing on the balls of her feet. It had been years since her last boxing match, sometime back in college before medical school stole away her extracurricular activities, but it felt good to be back at it once more. “I refuse to be sidelined by others. I’ve been caught in the crosshairs of this fight one too many times.”

The book didn’t respond, but when Sakura headed for the door, it leapt in her way. I’m not pleased about this decision, but I’ll feel better going with you rather than letting you struggle on your own.

“Great!” Sakura exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “Can you draw me a map to the site of the Founding Sacrifice?”

The book sat still for so long, Sakura wondered if it had heard her. Why do you want to go there?

“Because I’m nearly certain I had a vision of the place last night,” Sakura replied. It had been difficult to sort through all of the things she’d seen the night before, but there was something about that last scene that seemed especially important. She remembered Suigetsu’s words from so long ago. There was a site where the Founding happened and Sakura knew that shrine was for the Maiden who gave her life for the protection of Pompeii. She didn’t think Suigetsu had actually followed through with his rash words about finding the site, if he had, he certainly hadn’t mentioned anything. And Suigetsu was the bragging sort. “I have a general sense of its location, even if you decide to abstain from giving me the map. It’d just cut down on some of my wandering.”

I’ll guide you. If a book could sigh, Sakura assumed it’d be similar to what the book did now, folding its pages inward before releasing them outward once more. Know that I do this under protest and I reserve the right to be the first to say, “I told you so.”

“Of course,” Sakura said, locking up behind herself. “I’d be disappointed if it were any other way.”

The book snapped itself shut in the way it always did when it felt snippy with her.

Sakura caressed the binding of the book fondly, glad to have it here with her. Despite her cavalier attitude, she was afraid. Her wrist ached as she remembered her last encounter with the trees. She knew what she was doing was foolhardy, but Sakura couldn’t remain idle. The secrets being kept from her, for her “protection” as she heard over and over again, had devastating ramifications; ones that Sakura didn’t know how to combat.

Which was why she marched up the path behind the clinic, making her way into the brush that grew with wild abandon. Sakura’s mood darkened as her environment did, branches greedily crowding out the light of the sun. She was doubly grateful for the book’s presence as it thrummed in her hands before falling open, showing a picture of the shrine within a circle, with words etched above it
reading, “Founding Site.” Beneath the picture was a box that showed three footprints.

“Cute,” she murmured, feeling her anxiety abate slightly. “Will you let me spin the stop when we get to our destination?”

*I’m a book, not a video game,* the book said, writing above the faux PokeStop.

“Yeah, but you’re a *magic* book,” Sakura replied, unable to fight the grin that crossed her face. “Can I catch something too? I’d love a Wartortle.”

*Don’t push your luck, kid,* the book replied as the footprints bar pulsed. There were now only two tracks. *We’re getting closer.*

Sakura looked up, startled to find that they’d made their way pretty deep into the forest. The trees that surrounded her towered high above her head, the branches so thick she couldn’t see the tops of the trees. The book had done a good job of keeping her distracted, immersing her in its pages rather than the reality that encompassed them. Grip tightening on the book, Sakura said, “C’mon, not even a Pikachu?”

And so they continued back and forth, bantering lightheartedly. Yet Sakura didn’t take her eyes off of her surroundings, attentive now to the encroaching shadows and rustling leaves. There were moments where the trees shook with the wind and Sakura almost thought she heard the whispers...but no, the sounds remained those of a normal forest.

So attuned was she to her surroundings, Sakura felt the moment things shifted. It was a slight thing, a hush brought on by magic. It felt sacred, tranquil. The hairs on Sakura’s arms and neck stood on end. She couldn’t help but feel that her very presence here defiled the land. This place was ancient and she was an interloper.

Something on the book’s page flashed and Sakura glanced down. The footsteps had disappeared and the circle began spinning. The book made fireworks dance across the page. Sakura chuckled wetly, immediately looking around as her laughter echoed. It was a happy sound, but in this place it felt somehow violent.

“What was that for?” Sakura asked softly, hating the way her voice still carried.

*You needed it. I’ve done my part; the rest is up to you,* the book scrawled before folding shut.

Sakura patted its binding in thanks before tucking it away in her satchel. Her hands shook as she did so, but Sakura ignored that. She took a deep breath to steady herself, catching a heady scent, fresh and rich. It was opulence and life, something so unique that Sakura paused.

She took in her surroundings once more, following the scent as it led her along through the trees to a small pool of water. The water of the pond was still and should have been stagnate, but Sakura could see to the bottom of the pool. It was the clearest water she’d ever seen.

And beyond it lay the shrine. The areas uncovered by moss shone a brilliant white, untouched by time. At its base was a bundle of incense, the ends of which were lit. The incense was giving off the smell that led her here. Sakura, who’d been making her way toward the shrine, stopped short, as a shiver ran down her spine.

There was someone else here.

Sakura adjusted her stance, widening her legs and bringing her arms up at the ready. When nothing attacked, she cautiously reached for one of her charms, the nazar, and placed it over one eye. Still,
she saw nothing.

Something creaked behind her and Sakura dropped into a crouch, turning, ready to strike.

The first thing she noticed were the flowers. Daffodils. Daffodils in resplendent yellows and oranges, brimming with life. They sprung from every crevice, covering nearly every surface possible.

The second thing she noticed was that the flowers were covering a suit of armor. It was old, ancient really, rusting in places and missing parts. It was riddled with gaping holes, filled only by the abundant daffodils. It was empty, aside from the flowers. In truth, it seemed to be held together by the flowers that spilled over the seams, binding the armor to the earth and to life.

Sakura narrowed her eyes, straightening from her crouch. The suit of armor didn’t move, though Sakura could almost feel it watching her. It was older and there were far fewer pieces, but Sakura could swear that she’d seen this set of armor before.

During Founder’s Day.

Sakura gulped as she stared up at the suit of armor with new eyes. This, whatever it was, was the remnants of one of the Founders. The armor was obviously built for a large frame, as it stood nearly seven feet in height. Even in death, the Founders were larger than life.

Sakura wasn’t sure if it was alive, but it was certainly capable of movement as it hadn’t been here a few moments prior.

With shaky steps, Sakura made her way closer to the armor, watching for any sign of aggression. There were none. She reached out, fingers trembling and placed her hand to the chest piece of the armor. It was warm.

Sakura looked up into the face plate of the armor. Daffodils spilled over the edges and Sakura could see the emptiness behind them. Yet she could feel its gaze upon her, gentle but heavy. “What are you?” she asked, trailing a hand across the flower. “Why are you here?”

The armor offered her no response, not that she truly expected one. Instead it reached up with one massive hand and plucked a daffodil free of its shoulder. Slowly, it reached forward, tucking the flower behind her ear with a tenderness that belied its strength and size.

Sakura captured its hand in both of her own as it moved to pull away. Her eyes flickered to the shrine and the incense. “Do you guard this place?”

The wind whipped up around them and the suit of armor scooped her up in its arms, swiveling in place to drop her atop the shrine. The branches around them sprung to life and the whispers set in as the suit of armor took a defensive stance in front of the shrine, in front of her.

It was protecting her.

Sakura watched in awe as the armor, so docile and gentle moments ago, ripped a branch free and slammed it into its brethren in a cacophony of noises. Sakura noticed that none of the branches even attempted to attack her or the shrine, focusing entirely on the suit of armor.

For a moment, it seemed that the armor would win.

Then there was a horrific scraping sound as a branch pierced the side of the armor. The suit stumbled, daffodils falling as it wrenched free of the branch. More branches began to strike the armor, lancing it through. Sakura watched in horror, realizing with a start that the holes she’d seen in
the armor earlier were from the trees.

The entity in the forest hated the suit of armor as much as, if not more than, it hated Sakura.

Sakura wrestled her knife out of her satchel before dropping the satchel and dashing forward, heedless of the danger. She sliced across one of the branches that still pierced through the armor’s side, smiling in satisfaction as it drew ichor to the surface.

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” Sakura murmured through clenched teeth as she pulled away and parried a blow from another branch that left her arms aching.

Everything was still for a moment and Sakura had a feeling that she’d done something unexpected, both to the suit of armor and the entity of the forest.

Then, everything snapped back into action as a branch cracked against Sakura’s jaw. Sakura tasted copper as the branch cut her skin open, but she gritted her teeth and reached out with one bandaged hand to take hold of the branch. She sliced through it with the knife, turning the branch left in her hand into a baton of sorts, knocking back the branches as they attempt to hit her.

Beside her, the suit of armor rose and began swatting at the branches that swarmed them. It took the heaviest of the blows, always angling itself over Sakura in protection.

Still, Sakura took her fair share of hits. Some places openly bled, while others formed the foundations for what Sakura knew would be fantastic bruises. The trees were unrelenting in their force. For every branch struck down, others rose to take its place. It was only a matter of time before they fell beneath the forest’s force.

Sakura glanced at her companion, grinning as it took out three branches in one blow. She wasn’t going to stop either. She couldn’t give up now, no matter what.

There was a magnificent clanging sound somewhere beyond Sakura’s line of sight and the whispers picked up into a crescendo of hatred. Sakura braced herself, knife flashing as it caught the flailing branches around her. And then the branches were gone, as were the whispers.

The entity fled.

Sakura glanced around, wondering why for a moment before her eyes caught off of gleaming metal. Another suit of armor crouched over a pile of broken branches, a large sword in its hand. This suit was similar to the first, though instead of daffodils, it was filled with marigolds. It stood to its full height and Sakura shrank back slightly as it turned her way. It flicked its sword once and approached.

Sakura widened her stance, raising her knife. She knew she was no match for this thing. She could taste the magic on it and on the other one, potent and heady and overwhelmingly powerful.

Still, she refused to go out without a fight.

The daffodil armor stepped in front of her, facing the marigold. They stood tensely for a long moment before the marigold suit returned its sword to its sheath. It thrust out another sword to the daffodil armor, which took it.

Sakura stayed on alert, ready for anything. She stepped forward, hissing as it agitated an injury on the meat of her thigh. She glanced down, glaring at the cut that seeped blood, hating her weakness. A shadow fell across her, the only warning she had before she found herself flung through the air, landing with a shriek in the pool of water.
Sakura leapt to her feet, raring for a fight. She stopped as she realized that there was no pain to any of her movements.

Sakura glanced down, awestruck when she found herself free of all blemishes. She was healed. Sakura looked up at the sets of armor once more, grinning as she exited the pool.

“No wonder you keep this place secret. You could easily put me out of my job.”

Sakura walked out of the forest, bone-tired but satisfied. She hadn’t gotten all of the answers she sought, hell, she had more questions now, but it was a start. She’d done something, however small it might be.

She’d promised to return to the clearing soon, but first Sakura needed to investigate the town more. Hiruzen was sure to have books on Pompeii’s Founding. Maybe she could find out more about the heroes, about the warriors that once inhabited the suits of armor.

One thing Sakura knew for sure: the entity in the forest did not care for the shrine. In fact, Sakura was almost sure it feared that place.

Sakura glanced around, realizing that she was coming out of the thicket near the grocery store rather than her apartment. She’d no idea how she’d gotten that turned around in the forest, though she wasn’t too surprised. Pompeii was surrounded on all sides by the trees.

“Sakura!”

Sakura turned slightly, raising a hand in greeting as Hashirama approached her. “Hashirama,” she said. “It is nice to see you. How is the search going?”

“It’s slow moving,” he replied, looking harried. “There’s less resources at hand than we’re used to.”

Sakura’s frown deepened. She knew he considered Yamato one of those “resources.” “Well, I hope everything is resolved soon. I’ll see you around, I have to get home. I have dinner plans.”

Sakura strolled on, conscious of his stare. What she did not realize, however, was the way his brows furrowed as he watched her leave. Hashirama then turned toward the forest, lips pursing as he traced her path with stormy eyes.

Chapter End Notes

pawns can become any piece EXCEPT a king, so basically dream!sakura breaks the game and gives the forest entity the middle finger. finally my third grade experience of chess club is of use in my adult life. are you proud of me mother?
Nothing was ever perfect and nothing would ever be truly perfect, but sometimes Sakura started to believe things were as perfect as they could get. She didn’t need anything else but friends like family and quiet nights surrounded by a feeling of security. Stuff was growing more and more hectic with the allergy season ramping up and more people coming into the clinic to act like children about a runny nose, but Sakura still had the evenings to rest and unwind with friends closer than friends.

Behind her, Sai combs through her hair with his fingers, pulling apart strands into sections he would weave together later. He always took his time when she allowed him to play with her hair. Sakura readjusts her position on the floor, bumping one of Sai’s knees with her own before reaching to throw down a card atop one of Yamato’s.

“Go fish.”

Sakura groaned. “Are you going to say that every time? I messed up once, just once, and you need to remind me every chance you get. This is rummy, I got it, I know.”

Yamato’s smile was teasing.

Behind her, Sai stilled. “You’re very intelligent, but sometimes you are not that bright. He only says that to make you agitated and to cause a reaction. If you subtract the reaction from the equation then you will lose the agitation.”

“Hey,” Yamato quips loudly, sitting up straighter and pulling his legs under him. “I like the reaction.”

Sakura chuckled and reached back to pat one of Sai’s hands. “It’s okay, Sai, I already know why he says it. I don’t really mean it when I say it frustrated me. I think it’s cute because it reminds me of times we’ve shared together in the past. So when I get upset sometimes it’s okay.”

Sai’s hands still once more. “How will I be able to tell when you’re really upset?” he asks with a worried tone.

“Here are some clues, if I’m smiling or laughing then it’s okay. If I’m really upset my face might heat up and my eyes might get glassy with tears. I’ll say I’m really upset and I’ll never lie to you if you don’t know and have to ask me.”

“I couldn’t see your face,” Sai mumbled, still sounding troubled.

“There are also tonal intonations I’ve noticed when it comes to Sakura. If she’s really upset her voice will crack and otherwise you can tell it’s really fine if her voice is normal…but I think that’s only true with Sakura.” Yamato frowned to himself. “I don’t know what it’s like for other people though.”

“It’s fine then,” Sai answered. “Aside from you two, I don’t care enough to distinguish such things in others. It’s only troubling to be faced with one’s own failings yet again. Do not mind me.”

His hands moved back into her hair and picked up where they left off, twisting strands over strands. It was almost enough to put her to sleep, but Sakura turned down her cards and reached out to touch his knees. When she felt his fingers still she spoke.
“It’s okay if you don’t feel comfortable opening up to others just yet, or learning more about the world at this time, but don’t think you’re incapable of doing so. You’re going to change and grow and things that were harder to you before will become easier over time, I believe.”

Yamato grinned, pinning his own cards down on the floor and using his free hands to cradle the back of his neck. He stretched all the while smile brightly over at Sai. “Yeah, you’re still just a twig of a kid. You’ve got plenty of time to learn these things. And trust me, at least you’re aware of how much you don’t know. Better than assuming you know it all and don’t need help.”

“I’ve met men like that,” Sakura snickered.

“You didn’t like these men, Sakura?” Sai asked.

Sakura laughed and it felt like a bubble popping, tickling his ears. “Gods, no. They’re the worst, always assuming to know what you want in life, assuming that they’re what you want, ugh, no thank you.”

“What do they think you want?”

Sai asks the question but it’s Yamato whose eyes go wide.

“They…men like that think that all women want a piece of them, to be with them, and that the reason I say no is because I’m only teasing them and trying to play hard to get.”

Sai nods along, listening and understanding. His expression is serious and it’s apparent to anyone watching that he is taking her words to heart. “And you’re not?”

“No, this is different than when I’m with you and teasing Yamato. I already know Yamato, we’re close, and he knows me well enough to know when I’m joking and when I’m not. If he didn’t, I would tease him so much and pretend to get upset when he says something stupid.”

“Teasing is a sign of closeness?”

“For me it is.”

Sai was quiet for a while as he finished the braid in her hair. Across from her, Yamato breathed an extra heavy sigh of relief that their conversation didn’t stray into the realms of ‘what dirty old men want with pretty girls.’

They had already had one conversation with the boy about sex and it had been brief and terrifying. Sometimes Sai was an adult that saw more than any of them of the cruel world, but other times he was a sweet and innocent child that didn’t know the first thing about what happened to his body when he was attracted to someone. Rumors circulated about the kids from Root being sexless humanoids, and maybe that was the case once before, but Sai was learning…maybe too fast the ways of the world.

“There, done.”

Sai pulled away and Sakura reached behind her to feel for the braid that ran like a crown around the base of her skull. She smiled brightly, turning around to face Sai and grab him up into a hug that made him squeak.

“I love it!” she exclaimed. “Thank you.”

And it wasn’t a moment too soon that the timer above the stove goes off and Sakura can spell the
chicken done. She gets up to pull it out and, seamlessly, the boys around her fall into the routine of setting up the table and carrying over the other items that would make up their dinner. They didn’t need words anymore, it was routine by this point, which was funny.

Sometimes it seemed only yesterday that Sakura was on her own, feeling like there wasn’t a spot of her anywhere. Seeing Sai and Yamato clear space for her chicken, as mundane as that was, put a weight in her chest that filled her up.

Sakura cut into the chicken to check and make sure it was done. A beautiful pink meat peaked out at her from the slice and she grinned. Sai would complain if it wasn’t cooked all the way through.

Maybe Pompeii wasn’t a perfect home, but she was almost positive that this was as close as it was ever going to be. For her it was enough. For her it was perfect.

- “More allergies,” Sakura murmured to herself, frowning at the chart with the list of names she had to meet with today.

It was more of the same and she was beginning to worry if there was something she was missing when she saw so much of the same in different people. Nothing was serious, and most of the time an antihistamine would take care of the symptoms right away. It was almost like most of the people in Pompeii didn’t know how to use traditional pharmaceuticals unless she walked them through it. Did they really need an appointment with a doctor over something so minor?

“He’s here,” Shizune called out.

Sakura looked up from her chart and put it back on the wall, letting the cover papers fall over the names. “Thanks, I’m coming,” she answered.

With her hands in her pockets she walked out, brightening when she spotted the rougher blond with eyes like shards of the clear day sky. Only one was visible, as the other was obscured behind heavy bangs and some other ocular instrument.

Deidara turned at the sound of her and his grin was a cut through his lips. There was mischief in the way he held himself, and she had to remember Ino’s warning about her cousin. After Ino learned that Sakura was, oddly, not intimidated or disgusted by Deidara, and Ino had launched into a whole speel about don’t mess with fire because you’ll get burned and Deidara is worse than fire, he’s fireworks.

Still, Sakura was glad to see him and glad to see he was in much better shape than when she last saw him.

“You look better than the last time you were here. You said it was allergies? They must not be that serious if you look that happy to see me,” Sakura greeted.

“They’re not. It’s just something that’s going around and normally we would just deal with it, but when you have a cute doctor that pampers you, why not take advantage of it? I’ll be honest and admit I might have been looking for an excuse just to come in and see you, yeah.”

Sakura led him into the back, smirking playfully at the way he jauntily sauntered past her, like it was all a game to him.

“How have you been?” she asked, shutting the door behind them.

“Oh just great. There’s this fantastic perch I’ve got going for me that’s ideal for sunsets and last week
I was out there when—"

“I meant your allergies,” Sakura laughed, interrupting his ramble.

The part of his face she could see flushed with color as he ducked his head and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. I’ve been a little isolated, I think. It’s been nice to come in and talk to someone who doesn’t chase me out the first chance she gets.”

A part of her heart hurt for the guy. “So it was a nice perch?” she asked.

Sakura took her time with her observation, already knowing that his allergies would yield that same prescription and saw no need to rush their appointment. She still did a thorough job and made sure what she suspected was confirmed, but she also listened to his stories and asked him probing questions.

“I’ll take you some time if you’re up for it.”

Sakura paused as something conflicting came into her eyes. Deidara caught it and reached for her hand that was bracing on his chest under his shirt. She could feel as well as hear his heartbeat when he tugged her attention to his face.

“Hey, you okay? Something happen in the forest you don’t like?” He swallowed and she felt his reaction to dropping her hand like a spark. “Or-no, never mind. I don’t-no one goes with me anywhere. That’s not-I’m sorry I suggested it. I got caught up and ran my mouth again. I was just—”

“It’s not you,” Sakura sighed, reaching up to pull the stethoscope out of her ears. She hadn’t finished listening to his lungs, but she needed to not be distracted and calm him down before doing anything else. She didn’t want an inaccurate reading because something she said elevated his heart rate.

“The forest isn’t friendly to me right now. I think I need to stay out of it for a little while more. I was there recently, but I don’t know if that was a mistake.” She wanted to believe her interest in getting to the bottom of the situation wouldn’t be her undoing. Maybe she sounded more responsible than she really was, because in her heart there was that desire to go back, to know, to seek, and to find.

Go go, go!

Her wrist still tingled some days, reminding her that it shouldn’t have healed as fast as it did without the medicine. Her bones remembered and they were whispering things to her that she chose not to hear. Magic was in her bones, now more than ever.

Deidara looked down at her from atop the exam table and pursed his lips. “It’s sometimes scary, you’re right. Pompeii has always been Pompeii, and that means something to people. Maybe it’s a season of agitation, but it will pass, it always does.”

She pushed down her feelings, stood on top of them, and smiled up at the blond. “You’re right. Let me get a better look at those lungs. Do you mind actually taking your shirt off for this next part?”

Deidara hesitated, his fingers on the hem of his tank top. “No,” he finally admitted, screwing his eyes shut and pulling the fabric up over his head and holding his breath.

Sakura saw a scar over his heart and what looked like another mouth sewn shut. His face was pinched and turned away from her.
“I’ll be gentle,” Sakura said, moving the cold metal piece to his chest and bracing with the other hand. “Breath in, inhale than hold it for me….good, now exhale for me. Yes, thank you. One more time.”

Sakura listened to his lungs once more before moving around to hear from the back. Where she touched skin he seemed to warm for her.

“Yup, it’s allergies for you too. Nothing more serious than that, thank goodness.” She pulled away and tugged out the ear pieces so as to not hurt herself. “I’ll be writing up a prescription if you think you need something stronger, but most over the counter medications will be all you need.”

Deidara huffed, ducking his head into the neck hole of his shirt. “I’ll stick to the over the counter stuff, if you don’t mind. That old woman’s grandson has had it out for me for gods know how long.”

Sakura had to pause to think for a moment before responding. “Sasori?”

Deidara’s nose wrinkled at the sound of his name. “That one, yeah. The immortal art obsessed twat. Yeah, um. I probably shouldn’t mention him. I pissed off a witch a while back and now he shows up sometimes because of this hex and it’s always triggered by something like mentioning his name out loud or thinking about him too hard. I hate the guy, I’ll have you know. We always fight when we meet.”

“You meet often?”

He shook his head and hopped off the table. “Nah, it’s not a strong hex and it’s more like, he’ll happen to cross paths with me, it’s not like a summoning.”

“You didn’t ask your cousin to ask someone to look into it for you? Ino knows some witches I think.”

Deidara laughed, straightening out the wrinkles in his shirt, or trying to before giving up and resigning to the rumpled, punk look he seemed to radiate. “It’ll be a cold day in hell before my cute little cousin manages such an impossible task for me.”

Sakura pushed open the door with her prescription notepad already filled out, but paused on a step when she noticed the man waiting for her at her desk, and not in a waiting chair. Behind her she heard Deidara curse.

“You,” Sasori hissed, straightening suddenly.

Deidara’s shoulder hiked. “What are you doing here, scab?”

Sasori seemed more animated in his annoyance than Sakura had ever seen before. His hair seemed to shake the tiniest bit as he held himself up. “I should be asking you that. I have business with Sakura, you’re the outsider here. What are you even doing inside the city limits, you hack?”

Sakura took a step back, drawing more centered between the two opposing males. For a moment it was as if she were forgotten as the duo launched into a well worn script of lines and insults that ranged from art to hair to skin tight jeans.

“Frankly, it’s embarrassing,” Sasori nearly hissed.

“At least my dick has an outline, what are you, sandpaper smooth?”

Sakura covered her face with her hands to hide how it burned. In the background Shizune cackled
softly to herself, watching the pair go at it. Her eyes were sparks of mirth. Apparently it had been too long since she last saw something this entertaining for free.

“So the red one is dickless as well,” Sai suddenly spoke up, appearing at Sakura’s shoulder in a breath.

She gasped and staggered away, surprised by his sudden appearance. “What the—what are you doing here, Sai?”

His eyes were wide, looking up at her through pitch black lashes. “I heard shouting and came down to make sure you were safe. Are they bothering you?”

“Who is this brat?” Deidara hissed.

Sasori wisely kept his mouth shut, listening for the answer.

Sai wasn’t an unknown person in Pompeii, but Sakura had learned not too early on, that Sai was a creature for the shadows and had little interaction with others, so it was rare but not uncommon for her to have to introduce him to older residents like Deidara, even though he was well known by someone like Ino or Naruto.

Sai’s expression was back to that baleful blank look when he turned his face to Deidara’s direction. “You do not matter to me. I need not explain myself. Sakura, should I remove him?”

“Talking to me like that, who do you think you are, here?” Deidara hissed before looking to Sasori. “He one of your hack art groupies?”

Sasori snorted delicately. “As if. Art is eternal. This creature is something else, obviously.”

“There you go again, on and on about art being something to collect dust and wear out. You would think you’re a human with such a pathetic outlook. The things that flash, that fade, those are examples of art. The gods looked down with envy in their hearts for all the love humans had for things they could never understand. Immortals were not made to love things, not truly. That’s our sick twist of fate, get it?”

“Close, but neither of us are immortal, or did you forget that, bird brain?”

“Close enough,” Deidara groused, still glaring hard at the redhead before his eyes cut back to Sai, who was standing at Sakura’s elbow. “And you, kid, get off Sakura. She’s working!”

Sai’s tone was even, but Sakura could tell from experience that there was a thread of annoyance under his words. “Both of you are wrong when it comes to art, neither of you should be wasting your breath.”

“I’m not even going to ask what you think, you’re not worth it,” Deidara groused.

“Nor I.”

Sasori’s attention shifted to Sakura and the hard angles of his gaze smoothed out. He paused for a breath that settle him and returned the softer aspects of his beauty. When he spoke, his tone carried familiarity.

“Sakura, my grandmother wanted to ask you what sort of ingredients and drugs she should be gathering and or preparing in the coming months. She noticed an increase in specific orders and wanted some clarity on what she should expect. I will return tomorrow around this time if it wouldn’t
be too much of a bother.” He reached for her hand, fingers brushing in what felt like an effort to do
nothing more than capture and hold her attention. “We may speak then.”

“An-and I have to go too,” Deidara rushed to say, attempting to look cool and badass like the
redhead by playing it cool. “I’ll leave my check with Shizune.”

“Of course that’s fine,” Sakura said to Sasori before turning to Deidara. “And yes, but come back if
it gets worse, kay?”

When both had left it was only Sakura and Sai in the office, with Shizune ducking into the back to
make a phone call and laugh some more to a friend. Sai reached for her hand and stopped her from
walking away. She turned back, a curious expression in her eyes.

“Art is an experience you share with others. Maybe sometimes it’s just yourself, but art…is meant to
be shared…I think.”

His voice was soft and Sakura’s heart melt to hear it.

“Yeah, I think so too.”

Sai folded his lips into a smile. “I knew you’d see it my way, hag.”

Sakura’s soft smile faltered a little bit, but fell off completely when Sai began to laugh in a horrible,
stilted, uneven manner. He sounded more like a metal machine grinding gears than a boy laughing.

“Sai, what did you just call me?”

“I read another book. This one said to use names to increase familiarity. I insulted you because we
are close, so this is teasing, right? I’m like Yamato, making you annoyed!”

From the backroom, Shizune cackled louder.

Another day without sight or word from Pein.

“You sure about this?”

Sakura nodded to the seal master and stepped back. “Yes, I don’t want to put miles on it when
returning it, so if you could just seal it and then unseal it at the location designated, that would be
wonderful.”

The man looked at the paper in his hands with her order request. “Yeah, that shouldn’t be too bad,
it’s not far though. I’d just drive it…at least once you know?”

Sakura smiled sadly, hating in her heart that she was doing this. She wanted the car, she wished she
could keep it, but there were too many invisible strings tied to it, she knew she couldn’t. She had to
do the right thing.

Damn the right thing.

“You can bill my office here, thank you.” Sakura took one last step back and watched as Pein’s gift
was there one moment and then gone the next, blinked between worlds. It would be in his designated
parking spot at the dinner and if he came back, he’d see it there.

If he came back.
“Where are you going, hag?”

Sakura turned, closing the door slightly. “Going back into the forest, Sai.”

He frowned slightly, lines puckering his forehead. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“There are answers in the forest, Sai, and no one else seems to be very forthcoming these days,” Sakura replied. She pulled the knife from the makeshift sheath on her belt. “Besides, you gave me a weapon for a reason.”

“I will accompany you.”

“No, you won’t,” she said firmly, shutting the door and moving closer to him. “You already have plans today. You said you wanted to get a job and you need to go to those interviews.” She paused, tucking the knife away and adjusting the collar of his shirt. “There. You look perfect.”

Sai looked her over. “You too look aesthetically pleasing, hag.”

Sakura sighed, minding her tongue about the nickname. “We both look great. You’ll do wonderfully at the interviews. Just…try to be polite.”

“I’m always polite,” Sai replied.

“Best of luck,” Sakura said, pressing up on her tiptoes and brushing a kiss across his cheek. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Bye.”

Sakura stepped outside and rounded the clinic, heading off into the underbrush. This was now a familiar path, given the number of times she’d visited the shrine. She set her pace at a comfortable trot, clutching the bag slung across her chest close. She hoped that maybe this time she could get some definitive answers.

A glint of metal was the only warning she received before a heavy suit of armor stepped into her path. Sakura careened, turning to the side and glancing off the edge of the armor before finding herself on her back, air knocked from her lungs. She blinked, glaring up at the marigold knight as she fought to recover her breath.

“Really?” she asked. For an uninhabited suit of armor, it sure looked damn smug with itself. “I’d think you’d be over this at this point. I mean, at this point, I feel like I need to get a card stamped with every visit and body check. After every tenth visit, I get one freebie where you don’t slam me to the ground when I visit.” The daffodil knight came crashing out of the woods to the left, shoving its companion aside before offering her a hand. She took it, smiling as the knight pulled her back to her feet. “Thanks.”

The daffodil knight kept hold of her hand, tucking it into the crook of its elbow. Sakura followed along in bemusement as it led her to the shrine. It gestured to a low, smooth rock that sat beside the pool of water. Sakura took the seat gratefully, pulling out a few books as she did so.
“Since we don’t really have a good way of communicating, I figured I might try consulting a few history books. You two are definitely old.” The marigold knight threw its head back. “Oh, don’t give me that sass, Mari! I just meant you’ve been around for quite some time. I have no idea how no one else has stumbled across you in the past, but it seems I’m the only one aware of your existence.” And right now, she wasn’t feeling exactly charitable to the local leaders. If they wanted to keep secrets, so could she. It was petty and more than a little childish, but Sakura didn’t much care at the moment. “I thought we could play a little game. It’s called twenty questions. I’ll ask you a bunch of ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions; tap once for ‘no’ and twice for ‘yes.’” Sakura patted the stone as a display of the game. “Let’s see if we can figure out your identities.”

The marigold knight crossed its arms but the daffodil knight stepped forward and tapped its foot against the stone twice. Sakura grinned before delving into the first book. “Let’s see…do you remember the Fallout of 1659? The Hyuga and the Uchiha got into a massive fight, something about a kidnapping attempt?” The daffodil knight tapped its foot once. “Okay, so did you come here after 1659?” The knight tapped once again. “Were you…were you asleep here or something?” The knight tapped twice. “Okay, okay, we’re getting somewhere! Have you been awake for a long time?” One tap. “Less than a year?” Two taps. Sakura stopped, biting her lip as she calculated. “Were you…did you awaken near the end of August of last year?” There was no response. The knight just stood, seemingly puzzled. “Oh! August is a month of the year; it’s at the beginning of Fall, when the leaves are just starting to change colors.” Two taps.

Sakura felt a shiver run down her spine. August. It was the month she’d first arrived in Pompeii. Why on earth would these beings awaken upon her arrival? What had catalyzed the awakening? It couldn’t have been her, right?

Right?

Sakura shook her head, knowing it was a question that she couldn’t answer, not yet. Instead she turned back to the book. “Okay, well, we still need to determine when you two first arrived in Pompeii. Does the Great Fire of 1132 ring a bell? There was a major incident between Hiruzen Sarutobi and one of his students which resulted in a calamitous fire that nearly destroyed Pompeii.” The marigold knight tapped once alongside the daffodil one this time. Sakura smiled slightly, taking in their absolutely synchronous motions. “Alright, how about the Flood of 407? There was a power struggle in the Kiri sector that resulted in Yagura taking command.” One tap. “609 BCE, two covens of witches got into a major fight over territory just outside of Pompeii borders.” One tap. “2110 BCE, there was an earthquake that…raised the dead?” Sakura paused, reading it over. “Four necromancers got into an argument and they caused the earthquake while raising the dead. Wow.” One tap.

Sakura sighed, flipping through a couple of the books. “Well, there’s not much written about events before that. I guess people weren’t concerned with keeping records of what was going on. That or those books aren’t available to me.” She wished that the journal wasn’t so damn evasive on Pompeii’s history. “A lot of the rest of these are pretty obscure. Do you know anything about an active volcano?” Two taps. “Really? Were…were you involved in the founding of Pompeii?” No response.

Sakura looked up at the two knights. They stood there, motionless and for the first time they didn’t seem alive. They looked…dead; empty. Sakura swallowed, following the direction of their helmets to the shrine.

Oh.

She stood slowly, placing a hand on their vambraces. There was a creak as they turned their helms
her way. “I’m so sorry,” she said softly. “The Maiden…you knew her.”

There was no response. Sakura stood there with them in silence, just watching over the worn but still beautiful shrine. The bluebells danced in the breeze, water rippling softly. This, right here, was her final resting ground. Well, at least her spirit. Sakura didn’t think her body survived the heat of the volcano. The daffodil knight shifted its vambrace, placing its hand in hers. While it didn’t move, Sakura moved her hand down the marigold knight’s arm and took hold of its hand. She smiled when the marigold knight actually let her.

“This place…it’s peaceful,” Sakura said. “Thank you for sharing it with me.”

Both hands squeezed around hers.

“You should really be more careful.”

Sakura jumped, hand going to the knife at her belt. She groaned as she realized who it was. “Kakashi? What the hell are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question,” he replied, slouching forward off the tree he was leaning against to fall into step beside her. “You need to be more careful about traipsing around the forest.”

Sakura looked up at him as she walked on, a slight smile quirking her lips. “You should heed your own advice too, don’t you think?”

“Not many traverse the forest unscathed these days. As doctor, I’m sure you’ve seen quite a few allergy and fatigue cases recently.”

“Yes, how did you-”

“You should be careful about who sees your comings and goings in the forest. They’re bound to draw attention if you don’t tread lightly.”

“Whose attention would I be drawing?” Sakura asked.

“You’ve met them then, whatever it is at the shrine?” Kakashi said, circumventing Sakura’s question.

Sakura stilled. “You know about the shrine?”

Kakashi shrugged, making the gesture look like an effort. He looked so tired, as if he were carrying the burden of the world upon his shoulders. But he wasn’t Atlas and Sakura was no Hercules to shoulder the weight. “I know of it. I’ve never been allowed close enough to examine it or even see it really.”

“Not allowed? What do you mean?”

“How’s Yamato?” Kakashi asked abruptly, derailing Sakura’s line of questioning. “I heard he’s turned his back on the Senju.”


“And you do?”

Sakura’s mouth firmed at his tone, knowing exactly what he was implying. “Yamato is my friend; I am not his master or liege lord. We’re equals.”
“Really,” Kakashi said. “And does he know that?”

Sakura whirled on him, exasperated. “Yes. Yamato is my friend, my family. I have never and would never subject him to the treatment he received at the hands of the Senju.”

“The Senju are his family,” Kakashi pointed out. “They even have a stronger claim with genetics and all that.”

“No, they are not his family,” Sakura said fiercely. “They treated him like cannon fodder, a tool whose value only comes from how well he served them. That isn’t who he is and that isn’t what family is.”

Kakashi was silent for a long moment. Sakura watched him, knowing that he was processing her words. “How’d he do it?” he asked finally, voice low and fervent. Sakura blinked, surprised at the change. Kakashi was usually distant and cryptic but now…well, he seemed desperate. “How did you free him?”

“What? I didn’t—”

“Kakashi!” a voice barked.

Sakura turned, hand at the hilt of her knife. At her side, Kakashi slumped and all that energy, that vivacity, drained away until he was once more that remote individual. In the shadows of the trees, a man stood. The darkness mostly hid the scarring, but his eye glowed red in that distinctly Uchiha way. He was dressed resplendently in dark, heavy clothing, covered from neck to toe in fabric. It was an outfit better suited to winter, rather than the sweltering heat of summer.

“Obito,” Sakura greeted, nodding to him slightly. “It has been a while.”

“It is good to see you well, Dr. Haruno,” he replied with a wide smile. He stared at her in a frank, unnerving way. “Quite good indeed.” Then his attention turned to Kakashi and the smile fell away, even as his single eye began to spin. “Kakashi, come.”

Sakura bit her tongue as Kakashi moved the distance between herself and Obito, every inch the recalcitrant dog. He stopped at Obito’s shoulder, turning to face Sakura once more. His expression was blank and lifeless, the exact opposite of the passion there only moments ago. What on earth was going on?

“I apologize for my colleague’s countenance,” Obito said, seemingly ignoring Kakashi now. His attention was solely upon Sakura. “Kakashi has always been a gloomy individual. Never good at keeping friends around. Was he bothering you?”

“No, not at all!” Sakura hastened to say, wary of the stormy look on Obito’s face. He was different from the other Uchiha somehow and Sakura was beginning to see why Itachi and Shisui seemed to fear him, skirting around even the mention of him. Obito was terrifying in a wild, unpredictable sort of way. “Kakashi has been quite kind.”

Obito hummed, striding close enough that she could feel his body heat. A gloved hand pressed beneath Sakura’s chin, lifting it for his perusal. Sakura glared into his single visible eye, refusing to be distracted by his scars or the pattern of hippogriffs on his eyepatch. A flash of movement caught her attention as Kakashi made an aborted gesture, reaching out to her before drawing back into himself.

Sakura frowned.
Kakashi was afraid.

He clicked his tongue. “I just don’t understand the family’s interest in you. You’re such a scrawny, wiry thing. Not much personality either.”

Sakura smiled at him, holding steady eye contact. She refused to back down from him. She knew his type all too well, the sort who got mean and nasty because they were so hurt and broken themselves that they just had to propitiate those feelings onto others. If they couldn’t be happy, no one could. “Didn’t realize I was giving a performance,” she said, hand on the hilt of the knife. It wouldn’t do much, but it’d at least sting a bit if Obito chose to pull any stunts. “Would’ve performed better if I knew I had an audience.”

Obito grinned, the smile cutting just as well as any blade. He drew closer to her, until his breath touched her lips. “Well, color me surprised. Seems you’ve got a bit of fire in you yet.” He released her, pushing her away as he turned back to Kakashi. His strides were strong and sure as he walked past Kakashi, snapping his fingers. “Come. I look forward to seeing how you weather the coming storm, Dr. Haruno.”

Obito didn’t look back as he strode off further into the woods.

Kakashi, however, did.

Sakura saw two feelings warring in his expression. The first was a deep-set, heart-wrenching pain. The second?

Sakura frowned, ignoring the way the hairs at the back of her neck stood on end.

The second was pity.

“D-Dr. Haruno?”

Sakura glanced up from her history book, surprised to have been interrupted. She’d thought she was the only one who came to this little park. It was situated between two of the downtown buildings, only accessible through a seemingly empty and dingy alley. Apparently, she was mistaken. She squinted, unable to make out the interloper as his considerable mass blocked the light of the street lamps. “Yes?” she asked, placing the book in her lap.

“It is you!” he replied, sounding relieved. “Good, I was worried. I—we’ve never met before. I mean, I’ve heard of you but that’s a bit different than actually meeting you.”

Sakura stood, shifting slightly so she could see his features. He was tall, taller even than Kisame. She wondered if he had any giant’s blood in his family as the heritage certainly seemed to fit. “I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage then, Mr…”

“Juugo,” he said, shaking her hand. “Just Juugo.” He looked around and Sakura caught the shifty nervousness that fairly emanated from him. “Look, is there somewhere we can go? I…I have an injury that needs treating.”

“Of course,” Sakura said, shoving the book down into her bag. Her eyes flitted over him, assessing. She couldn’t see any immediate concerns. “Would you like to go back to my clinic?”
“No,” he said, looking around furtively. “Look, I…I can’t be seen with you. I can’t be admitted officially. I’ll get in trouble.”

“Who would get you into trouble?” Sakura asked. “You will be safe at the clinic. And there are…policies in place that will protect you from getting into trouble with me if you don’t have…certain information.” She’d seen this skittishness before and each and every time it broke her heart. “Hey.” She waited until he looked her in the eyes. He had kind eyes, gentle. Haunted. Her smile was soft as she continued, “This is my private practice; I make the rules. You will be safe with me. What do you say?” Sakura stuck out her hand again.

Juugo hesitated before taking her hand. “Okay. How will we get to the clinic though?”

“Leave that to me,” Sakura replied, rifling through her bag. She pulled out a little charm, passing it to Juugo. “This is a notice-me-not charm. It isn’t powerful enough to register on people’s magic sensors, but it should last us long enough to get to the clinic. No one else will be at the clinic at this time of night.”

“You carry distraction charms with you to read in the park?” he asked, looping the cord around his neck.

Immediately, Sakura’s eyes slid away from him, unable to focus on his presence. “Never hurts to be prepared,” Sakura said, thinking of Kakashi’s cryptic warning.

She heard Juugo hum in agreement as they left the alley and made their way toward the clinic. There were very few people out at this time and a few waved in Sakura’s direction. Thankfully, none seemed to notice Juugo beside her.

They made it to the clinic without incident and Sakura took him back to one of the rooms, flicking on the lights as she went.

“So, what seems to be the problem today, Juugo?” she asked.

“It’s probably best if I show you,” he said, pulling off his shirt and turning his back to her.

Sakura’s eyes went wide as she took in the set of gashes that marred his shoulder. They were no longer bleeding, but the wounds were deep and raw. “Sit down!” Sakura said, drawing closer to examine the wound. She was more than slightly surprised that he’d managed to behave so normally with a wound like this. The edges of it were discolored, green with either infection or magic or a mix of both. “On a scale of one to ten, how much pain are you feeling right now?”

“A two,” Juugo replied. “It doesn’t really hurt; I’ve had worse. I was just going to let it heal on its own but when the wound changed colors, I thought it best to get help.”

“You did the right thing, Juugo,” Sakura said. “I’m going to check your vitals before I treat the wound, is that alright?”

Juugo shrugged, the heavy muscles of his arms and back rippling with the motion. The wound stretched with the movement, but Juugo truly didn’t seem to feel it.

Sakura quickly and efficiently ran through the tests of his vitals, finding all within a normal threshold. She looked at the gashes on his shoulder blade again, pondering. “How did you get these wounds?” Juugo remained silent. “Juugo, I’m not asking out of some desire to condemn you; I need to know so that I make sure I give you the best possible treatment.” Still, he stayed quiet. Sakura sighed. “Alright. Well can you at least tell me if the attack was magical or not?”
“...magic was involved,” Juugo said.

Sakura nodded, though he couldn’t see it. “It looks like the flesh was cursed during the attack. Are you allergic to holy water?” Juugo shook his head. “Wonderful. I’ll start by cleaning your wound with holy water before applying a poultice. Two of these gashes will need stitches, I can nearly see the bone.”

“Okay,” Juugo said.

“It will be painful,” Sakura said. “The holy water will eat away the curse and it will feel like a burning sensation to you.”

“I don’t mind,” he replied. “Do what you need to do.”

“Would you like me to numb the area first?”

“No!” Juugo said, turning to look at her. He coughed and said again, more sedately, “No thank you.”

Sakura nodded, pulling on gloves before she grabbed a few vials of holy water. She poured the first bottle along the edges of the highest gash, grimacing as the flesh immediately began to sizzle. Juugo didn’t so much as groan, sitting as still as stone as Sakura began the painstaking task of cleaning out the wound. As she surveyed the skin, Sakura noticed a bandage applied against Juugo’s neck.

“Juugo,” Sakura said, continuing with the treatment. “Did your wound extend further up?”

“No,” he replied.

“Then why do you have a bandage at your neck?” Sakura reached out, grazing her fingers along the bandage. “Whatever it is, I could treat—”

“No!” Juugo shot to his feet, upending Sakura’s table of surgical equipment. The remaining vials of holy water hit the ground, shattering. He turned to her, eyes wild as his hand clamped down over the bandage. He clutched so hard and Sakura could see the rivets of blood streaming out from beneath the bandage. “Don’t touch me!”

Sakura placed the holy water down, holding up her empty hands. She was intimately aware of the fact that Juugo was more than twice her size and that they were alone. “Juugo, I am so sorry,” she said, keeping her voice steady and calm. “I didn’t mean to upset you, truly. I shouldn’t have touched you there without your permission. I won’t do so again. Will you please allow me to continue treating your shoulder?”

Juugo watched her and Sakura was alarmed to see his flesh start to turn gray under his hand. He began to grin and Sakura backed up slowly, a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“Sorry?” he asked and his voice was pitched differently, higher, more lively. “You’re sorry?”

“Juugo,” Sakura said cautiously.

“I’ll show you sorry!”

He pounced just as Sakura slammed the door shut and ran for the front door, cursing herself for leaving her bag and her phone in the operating room. Stupid, stupid, stupid! There was a thunderous crash behind her as she flung open the door to the clinic and ran outside, not really knowing what her plan was. She just knew she had to get him away from the clinic, from her family.
“Sakura!” came the call from above and behind her, but Sakura didn’t have the luxury of turning around and seeing who it was. “Juugo!”

There was a thump beside her and suddenly Kimimaro was there, staring up at Juugo, completely calm. Sakura whirled, ready to pull Kimimaro out of the way. Juugo’s skin was now fully gray and his once soft eyes were changed, sclera black and irises poison yellow.

“Juugo,” Kimimaro repeated and there was a melodic, hypnotic quality to his voice. “Be still. Calm your rage.”

Juugo slowed to a stop, irises expanding as he stared at Kimimaro. The gray of his skin receded and suddenly his eyes were that warm gold that they once were. Juugo looked around wildly, deflating with relief when he saw Sakura. He began to fold in on himself, looking small and bereft despite his stature.

“Juugo,” Sakura said, stepping forward. She wasn’t sure what just happened, but seeing him now… all she knew was that he hadn’t been in control. “Juugo.”

Kimimaro shook his head, stepping in front of her. “Come, Juugo. I’ll take you home.” Kimimaro slipped Juugo’s arm across his shoulders, strength belying his slight frame. His eyes were piercing as he walked past her and out into the dark of night. “It’s late. Nothing good comes in the dark hours of the night. Goodnight, Dr. Haruno.”

Sakura watched as the duo disappeared into the shadows of the night, heart heavy.
His hair was getting longer and now he was having to do things with it. Sakura had offered to cut it, but Yamato had said he preferred it longer now that he had the option of growing it out. It felt better to be a little more rugged and a little more wild.

Of course Sakura teased him about turning into a wild bearded man before he reached out to try and smack her, complaining about how ‘she knew he had issues growing facial hair’ or something like that.

“It’s a little messy today. Don’t you want to put it up?” she asked, eyeing it critically.

His hair was lovely in its texture, and it made her envious, but Yamato was still learning how to take care of it.

He reached for his hair and started to pull it up with his hands, combing through with the nails of his fingers before letting it all fall back down. Behind him the radio was on with old songs plucked out on a banjo and old box drum about the fey in the wilds and the heroes who went after them. Sakura recognized the tune.

“I guess it would be nice to have it off my neck a little more,” Yamato muttered.

Sakura pulled a hair tie off her wrist, one that was bright yellow and matched the floral design of her tank top and ballet flats.

Yamato eyed the hair tie before leaning into her. When Sakura didn’t do anything, he but her with his head and grunted, pointing to his hair.

“Big baby,” Sakura muttered.

She reached for his hair and combed through it much like he had earlier, taking care not to scratch him with her longer nails. She checked to make sure she didn’t miss anything before tying it all up in a low ponytail that she ended up folding into a bun.

“There, now you should feel a little cooler when you’re outside. Where have you been, recently? I haven’t seen you about as much these days.”

Yamato shrugged before walking over to a part of the living room and reaching for something behind the couch. Sakura thought it might have been a guitar, but it was the wrong shape for it. It looked handmade apart from the strings she recognized as his last Amazon Prime order—the one he needed her account for.

“I’ve been trying to teach myself how to play.”

“You like to play?”

Yamato sat down and settled the instrument that was too short and too fat to be a guitar over his knee. He didn’t pluck, but he did start to move his hand up and down the neck of it.

“Maybe? I don’t know until I try it out some more. I’ve never had the opportunity to see for myself what sorts of hobbies I should gravitate towards. But, I know I like music, I always have, so this
seemed like a safe thing to try.”

Sakura felt her heart swell with warm pride.

“Play something for me?”

He looked up and grinned. There was something that twinkled in his eyes, something meant and reserved solely for her.

“Because it’s you...alright.”

Sakura looked down at the resume on her lap and then back up at Sai. She tried not to, but the sigh slipped out and was noticed.

“I need to make improvements,” Sai said.

“No, I...honey, I don’t think the issue is with this resume. You’ve done a good job crafting it. But I’m a little confused about the choice. You want to work at the grocery store? They have customers...you need to....interact with.”

Sakura hated how her words came out sounding like they were directed at someone far more inexperienced or younger than her. She didn’t want to do that to Sai after he worked so hard to get where he was.

It hadn’t been that long ago that she felt the pressure from others to reform herself and fix her bedside manner. Oddly enough, the way she remained nonplussed and unshaken by patient needs turned out being the thing that made her such a perfect fit for Pompeii. But Sai wasn’t Sakura and Sakura wasn’t Sai.

“Maybe the grocer is not the ideal career opportunity for my unique skills, however, they are short of staff and acquiring the job would be less challenging than others.”

“Still, the customer service aspect seemed to trouble you last time.”

Sai’s expression doesn’t change and Sakura knows he hasn’t taken offense.

“We were out of that size so the only other option was to lose weight. I was trying to be helpful.”

“Babe,” Sakura tossed the paper back to his lap and sagged down in her seat. “What are we going to do with you?”

“Make me cookies?”

Sakura couldn’t hold back a snort or a smile. “My cookies have not been coming out that great, lately.”

“You’re worried about something?”

She rose from her seat and stretched her arms behind her back, lifting her face to the roof of her apartment room and watching the pattern of the plaster flicker from the simulated fire coming out of her television. It had been raining a lot more recently with the onset of the monsoon season and it made her want to cuddle in slippers and blankets in front of a fire. She didn’t have a fire, so she compromised with the next best thing.
“I’m not going to be worried about anything,” Sakura sighed like she was making a decision. “Help me get the ingredients. I needed to bake something for Ino’s party, it might as well be cookies. If they come out terrible we can stop at the grocery to drop off that resume and pick up treats worth eating.”

“I always like eating what you make,” Sai commented in a matter of fact tone that was so painfully Sai it made Sakura warm.

Another far off boom of thunder echoed outside and the pair looked to the window of her balcony where the first few drops were starting to come down. It had been raining almost every other day for the past week or so. More than one person wanted to blame Pein for it, but Sakura heard some of her patients say that cursing the handsome god would only be taken as prayers and payment for rain, so it was better to keep your mouth shut about it all and hope he stays off wherever he is spinning storms out of prayers.

He hadn’t been back in weeks, and the car she returned hadn’t been touched or seen since. She wanted to feel anxious about it, but now that she knew where he was, she didn’t. Even apart, it felt no different.

“Was I invited to this party?” Sai asked her.

Sakura blinked, tearing her eyes away from the rain streaks. Sai had one hand inside the flour jar, grasping for the measuring cup buried at the bottom. Sakura always forgot to take them out.

“Shouldn’t you know that?” Sakura asked before batting his hand away to reach in and remove the cup.

“I am not sure. I received no communication about this event, but Ino mentioned leaving that up to Naruto, so it is possible he forgot about me. He’s been...absent.”

“There’s a bug going around that’s heartier than the common cold. Naruto’s had it off and on the worst out of everyone I know. That’s not a secret or patient confidentiality, by the way. I don’t want you to think that-”

Sai waved her words away. “You were only saying what I already knew. He’s been absent so often at the grocery store, which is why I am applying. He was out all last week, but fine the week before that. He might be there at the party tonight.”

Sakura felt her stomach roll. “I hope he stays home and gets some rest. There’s only so much I can do and it’s frustrating when you reach the end of your usefulness.”

“None of us are useful for everything always. For all of us there is an end of our usefulness. What do we do when we reach that point? What do other do with us when we reach that point? I think about this more than I would like to admit.”

He took the measuring cup out of her hand and used it to count out the number of cups of flour the recipe needed. Sakura let him mix the first few dry ingredients before slumping forward to drape her arms over his shoulders and stop him where he stood. He made an irritated sound, unable to move as freely, but Sakura just hugged tighter.

He complained to her about trying to work and eventually she let go of him to sit back and watch him put the ingredients together. It was a while before he noticed she wasn’t helping, only watching.

“Is it me bringing the treats, or you?”

He handed her a dripping spatula she had to cup to keep her floor from getting dirty with batter. He
dragged his index finger through the end of the spatula and then licked it clean before turning back to the work.

He hummed as he worked and ten minutes later the cookies were in the oven and Sai was cleaning his hands and complaining about the texture of cookie batter not being as good as the taste. She didn’t feel the need to comment, but Sakura couldn’t help but laugh, and it’s almost as bad as a comment judging by Sai’s reaction.

The cookies ended in something less than a disaster, pleasing Sakura greatly. Sai declared her baking funk was over and submitted an informal request for lemon bars.

“I’ll make you your lemon bars if you help me with my hair and makeup. You did such an amazing job last time,” Sakura said.

“It’s only because it’s on you. I don’t like working with others.”

Sakura rolled her eyes and remembered the disaster that was the beauty salon. Ino had never looked closer to murdering someone. At this rate, Sakura was fearful for Sai’s life if he flubbed any more job opportunities. One of them was going to end up in blood or bruises, at the very least.

The party was to watch a livestream of a solar eclipse or something close to that, Sakura wasn’t really sure. Ino seemed ready to host a party for any odd reason and so Sakura didn’t question it when she was invited.

If Sakura considered it, she realized she had been separated from some of her friends a lot more recently. That might have been because she was no longer a hot new commodity, being the ‘new girl in town,’ or it could have been because of something else. Maybe something in the forest. Maybe something less drastic.

Even the Uchiha raven and crows were scarce these days, or if they were around, they were far off watching from a distance. She tried to pretend that didn’t give her anxiety, but it was hard. Sai and Yamato were balms to her soul. She didn’t know what she would do or feel if they hadn’t been there.

Sakura scribbled a note on her nightstand to make a call to the Uchiha and check in on Izuna to see if he needed another treatment. His lungs were coming along great and she missed the visits, to be honest. Just….after Itachi…

Sakura let the pen roll off her nightstand, leaving the note blank.

She changed out of her casual wear and stepped into a pair of dark blue straight leg ankle biters and strap heel sandals. It was a party after all, so she put some care into choosing a dressy top that complemented the curves she had and imagined the curves she didn’t.

She was going through her collection of cheap earrings when Sai let himself in.

“Let me do your hair first,” he said, lightly smacking her hands away from the bangles.

“I want something that hangs.”

“That would be smart since this is an off the shoulder top, good eye.”

Sakura beamed at the praise before her chin was roughly yanked up and her hair was pulled into his fingers. Sakura kept her mouth and eyes shut, already trusting his choices. He tugged at her hair tight and then pinned it back before weaving fingers under the strands and teasing them out. Sakura
opened her eyes and looked in the mirror as he finished and smiled at the messy, low bun that had been too artfully crafted to be truly that messy.

He moved in front of her and touched the skin under her eyes before starting to smear cream there. Sakura winced at the cold feel, but let him paint her as he liked. Sai was good with his hands and had an eye for art. It was such a shame he couldn’t find a fit in a field where those traits were valued. His personality was too rough for a beauty salon.

“Sai!” Sakura gasped, eyes flying open.

“Shut them,” he commanded sternly.

Sakura did as she was told but didn’t settle her lips the same way. “I want your resume. I’m going to drop it off somewhere else. Forget about the grocery store.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Trust me.”

He clicked his tongue, but a few seconds later his brushes left her face and she heard him move. When she saw herself in the mirror she knew her suspicions were sure.

She grabbed a clutch and the pair left together. Sakura made Sai stop outside the tattoo parlor and dropped off his resume as well as a few sketches she had of his laying around. Sai stayed outside, staring up at the sign while Sakura put in the good word.

A handful of minutes later she had secured an interview on Thursday 4:30PM.

The whole rest of the way she was smirking like the cat that got the cream.

They were actually meeting it what looked like a renovated firehouse that Shikamaru was living in along with his buddy Choji. The pair split their time there and at the family homes. There were a few families hoping that wasn’t a trend that would catch on with their sons and daughters. Family was a big deal in Pompeii.

A few faces looked up and greeted Sakura with enthusiasm but then slid to Sai and then stiffly back to Sakura.

Ino cut through the crown to kiss the side of Sakura’s face and then tug the plate of cookies out of her hands.

“Come on, let’s get you something to drink, drink.”

Sakura could smell the booze and it was almost like highschool all over again, only this time they were supposed to all be adults. “Ino, it’s one in the afternoon.”

“What? It’s our happy hour.”

Her eyes were too wide and too blue to not be innocent. Sakura felt she couldn’t be surprised anymore by anything Ino said anymore.

“It’s good to see you too, Sai. You’ve been as elusive as ever. Sorry about the job not working out. Still friends?” the blonde cooed.

Sai nodded but seemed at a loss for words, which was okay because Ino just launched herself into the next thing she had planned on saying. In typical Ino fashion, all was forgiven and forgotten.
Something about Gaara doing this, Temari doing that, the Hyuga this, the Uchiha that. Sakura was glad for how much easier it was to keep up with the news and how much more impactful things seemed. These weren’t just names anymore. She knew most of these people.

“Where are Shikamaru and Choji, anyway? I should see them and thank them for hosting this party,” Sakura said, looking out into the room where two dozen or so people were gathered to lounge on couch arms and turned round chairs. The television was on showing the eclipse as it happened across the country. Sai took up a spot in front of the television.

“Where do you think the lazy snore hound would be? He’s sleeping on the roof again. He says the monsoon clouds are some of his favorite to watch and that he’ll come back in if it starts to rain again. I think Sasuke went up there, actually. A good bet if you’re looking for that Uchiha is to search for the high places.” Ino shrugged. “It must be a bird thing.”

Sakura accepted the drink put into her hands and sniffed once before sipping at the rim. She looked up when she noticed Ino was waiting patiently for a comment or reaction.

“Is this...cider?” Sakura asked. “I thought the season was still a month or two off.”

“Funny about that, ’cause it’s imported stuff. We’re bringing a lot of stuff in from the outside because our own stuff is on the down low, but just for a season. It’s great for variety. Sip, sip, I think you’ll like it.”

Sakura did like it and told Ino as much.

Ino moved on, taking a drink over to Gaara and encouraging him with a laugh like a bell to ‘enjoy himself’ a bit more. Moments later she was moving on to someone else, trying her best to make sure everyone was enjoying themselves like a good host would.

Sakura took Ino’s occupied space and sat down next to Gaara. Thankfully he seemed to perk up at the sight of her and not stiffen like he had around Ino.

“You look like you’re having fun,” Sakura lightly tease. “How have you been?”

“Better since seeing you. It’s been a...while?”

Sakura nodded, trying to remember the last time they had seen each other. “Not that long, though? What would you consider a long time?”

“It matters how much I want something, I suppose.” He sniffed at his drink and set it aside with a worried expression. “But it’s not just you. More families have become more busy with the summer season, that’s how it is every year I think. I’ve not seen Naruto in a couple weeks either.”

“Have you been sleeping, lately?” Sakura asked, reaching to brush hair out of his eyes without thinking. She paused only after her hand had made contact, realizing how inappropriate the contact might be since she hadn’t asked permission. “Sorry, bad doctor habit.”

Gaara managed a shy smile and shook his head. “No. Good doctor habit.” He looked up at all the edges of him seemed to melt around her. “It’s nice seeing you again here like this. You look nice.”

“Thanks, but I can’t take credit. I had help with my hair and makeup. I was never good at those things growing up when I was supposed to be learning such things.”

“We all have shortcomings, nothing to be embarrassed of.” He shrugged his shoulders and averted his eyes. “Also, you don’t really need...to be good at something like that. You look pretty no matter
“what you do.”

Sakura opened her mouth to say something back but the door to the front opened and she hear the conversation that made her head turn along with Gaara.

“Naruto! You made it, brat.”

“Don’t call me a brat, Kiba.”

Naruto and his twin were in the doorway but something was wrong about the way the blonde was standing, hands buried in the pockets of his windbreaker and smile wan. His skin wasn’t healthy with the usual tan, and his eyes seemed agitated.

Menma muttered something Sakura couldn’t hear from the distance, but guessed it to be something chastising based of both boy’s body language. Something like, ‘you really shouldn’t be here, Naruto.’

Sakura couldn’t help but agree when the doctor in her screamed at all the symptoms of an ill person that was pushing himself. Her eyes were wide, soaking all of him in with horror.

As if feeling it, his eyes met hers and the wan smile stretched wide.

“Sakura!” his hands slipped out of his pockets and he made a beeline for her. He looked so happy even if his brother was a vision of worry.

Sakura felt her heart stop when Naruto didn’t even make it halfway across the floor, but staggered and collapsed in a sick, sliding smile, and dizzy eyes.

Several voices shouted at once.

All Sakura could feel was dread.
“Naruto!”

Sakura heard the outcry of those around her but ignored it as she darted forward, catching the brunt of Naruto as he fell. She grunted, bracing her feet and slowly brought both of their bodies to the ground. She pressed her fingers to his pulse, glad to find it steady and strong. His skin, however, was cool to the touch and ashen grey. What the hell was going on?

“Naruto,” Sakura murmured, balancing his head on her lap. His eyelids fluttered slightly but remained firmly shut. “Naruto.”

“What the hell happened?” Menma demanded, brushing her shoulder brusquely as he sat down next to her. He took in the way her hands caressed Naruto’s temples and scowled. “Take your hands off him!”

“W-What?” Sakura said, so startled that she did as he asked. She looked to him, confused. “I’m trying to help him, Menma.”

Menma glared at her, leaning in close. “I’ve overheard my parents talking with Hashirama. Strange things are happening in Pompeii. The forest is…doing something to people. And it’s your fault!” His voice was soft, but Sakura saw a few onlookers react to the statement in shock.

“My fault?” Sakura asked, frowning softly. “I have nothing to do with this.”

Menma sneered, shaking his head. “So you say. All I know is mom and dad wouldn’t want you touching Naruto so back off.”

“Menma-”

“I said back off!”

Menma’s eyes flashed blue for a moment as golden energy spread from him and Naruto, buffeting Sakura and sending her skidding across the floor. She hit the wall hard, breath knocked from her body as her ribcage twinged in pain.

There was a flurry of movement from multiple people and Sakura heard Ino shouting, her voice shrill as she rained insults down on Menma. Sakura made to stand, frowning when she found she could not. Sai’s face swam into view and even through the fuzziness, Sakura could see the anger in his eyes. Was he mad at her too?

Sakura’s head lolled to the side as Sai lifted her into his arms, holding her close. He looked her over and something ran across his expression but Sakura couldn’t quite read it. Not now, when she was distracted by the pretty light cast by the lamps in the room.

Ink leapt free from Sai’s arm, forming into an eagle as Sakura continued to watch the dancing lights.

“Let’s go home Sakura.”

The eagle’s wings swallowed them whole as something tugged at Sakura’s gut before they suddenly reappeared in Yamato and Sai’s apartment. There was a discordant twang as Yamato slammed down
his instrument of the day, a banjo this time.

“What happened?” he demanded, rough voice belying the gentleness with which he pulled Sakura into his arms. “Who did this?”

“Uzumaki,” Sai replied.

“Hey Yamato,” Sakura said, bringing her hand up and patting Yamato’s face clumsily.

“Hey sunshine,” Yamato said, voice soft as he brushed the hair out of her eyes. His gaze cut to Sai, icy. “What happened?”

“Naruto collapsed at Ino’s party,” Sai said, clenching and releasing his fists rhythmically. “Sakura started to help but Menma knocked her away. She hit her head against the wall pretty hard.”

Yamato nodded, carrying Sakura downstairs to the clinic. He set her up on one of the examination tables, checking her eyes. “Her pupils look normal which is good, but I think that asshole concussed her.”

He turned to Sai, who was fidgeting with his hands, trying to ignore the strange feeling that was nearly overwhelming him. It was similar to the way he felt when Shin died, but he didn’t know the name to the experience. He just knew he hated it.

“Sai, go upstairs and make her something to eat. Get her some water too. She’ll need to sleep.”

Sai nodded, throat tight as he watched Sakura list against Yamato’s side. He turned, heading upstairs quickly, hoping to escape the feelings that threatened to overwhelm him.

It didn’t help.

“Alright,” Yamato said, methodically checking Sakura over for any signs of injury. “Would you prefer to stay at my apartment tonight or yours?”

“Yours will be fine,” Sakura said, balance still off. “I’m sorry for being such a hassle.”

“Nonsense,” Yamato said firmly, mouth tightening when Sakura flinched under his touch as he explored her ribs. “May I?”

Sakura nodded, sitting up and nearly toppling over as she tried to pull up her shirt. Yamato caught her and adjusted her shirt so he could check her ribcage. He caught his breath as the livid blossom of bruises came into view.

“Lay down,” Yamato ordered, assisting her in doing so before he began to explore the side cabinet where Sakura kept common, nonprescription potions and the like. He pulled out one clear vial filled with something that looked like a liquid storm cloud. He knew this potion all too well from the Senju compound. While such precious resources were rarely expended on him, he’d seen many Senju use it after patrols or a particularly aggressive spar. “Let’s get you up to bed.”

“Dinner in bed?” Sakura asked, curling into Yamato’s warmth. “That’s pretty special.”

“You’re a special woman, Sakura,” Yamato replied.

“I’m not though,” Sakura said, thinking of the fear in Menma’s eyes. “I’m really not.”

Yamato just tightened his grip on her, carrying her up to his bedroom and placing her in his bed. “Sai?”
“Here,” Sai replied, bringing in a tray laden with a grilled cheese sandwich and fruit slices. “I added the tomato to the grilled cheese, just as you like it.”

“You spoil me,” Sakura said, grabbing the tray and starting in on the sandwich.

Sai sat down on the corner of the bed, watching as she consumed the meal. Something warm burned in his chest, battering against his ribs and threatening to draw him under. He looked to Yamato as he leaned against the doorway, eyes dark with contemplation. Sai wasn’t too good at sussing out emotional responses, but he was familiar with this particular expression.

Anger.

“You need to go to bed, Sakura,” Yamato said as he took the tray away. “We’ll wake you every hour and a half to check on you.”

“You don’t have to worry about that!” Sakura protested around a yawn. “I don’t want to be a burden.”

“You’re not,” Sai said shortly. “See you soon.”

Yamato and Sai watched as she drifted off into sleep, troubled expression falling slack.

“I’ll take first watch,” Yamato said, focus entirely on Sakura.

Sai nodded, moving silently from the room and taking a seat on the couch. He frowned, clutching at the hollow feeling that pervaded his chest.

It persisted through the night.

Sakura glanced up from her computer to Shizune as she hung up the phone. “Another cancellation?”

Shizune nodded, scowling down at the phone. “Last minute too! People can be so rude!”

“At least they called in,” Sakura replied, biting her lip as she removed the only appointment on the calendar for the day. Her eyes burned with embarrassment, but her voice was steady as she said, “Shizune, how about you head out for the day? I know Tsunade was getting your help in a few potions.”

“But what about the clinic?” Shizune asked, coming around her desk to press a hand to Sakura’s shoulder.

“I’ve got it covered,” Sakura replied, still refusing to meet her gaze for fear of the pity she’d find. “I’ll keep working on adding old files to our computer database. Go on now, I can handle whatever comes in.”

Shizune squeezed her shoulder once before heading out. As the bell above the door chimed her exit, Sakura slumped forward, groaning into her arms. Ever since the debacle that was Ino’s party, there was a noticeable drop in clients. Sakura wasn’t sure what was going on with the residents of Pompeii and they seemed disinclined to tell her. She certainly felt their stares and heard their whispers as she walked around town.

It wasn’t surprising really.
She overstayed her welcome.

She always did, eventually.

Truthfully, Sakura lasted longer in Pompeii than she had elsewhere. A full year. She thought, in her most secret of thoughts, that she’d finally found her place, that she’d carved out a Sakura-sized niche into the town.

It was too good to be true.

The bell above the door tinkled and Sakura shot up, shoving her self-pity aside as she eagerly looked to her client. Except…there was no one there.

Wind whipped up Sakura’s hair around her face as a familiar voice said, “Why the long face, dear?”

“Fujin,” she greeted with a laugh. “It is good to hear your voice.”

Fujin rumbled a laugh that sounded of thunder claps. “You avoid my question.”

“It’s nothing really,” Sakura said. “The slow day allows for some morose introspection.”

“I’m surprised you aren’t seeing more business,” Fujin said and, from the way the papers on her desk fluttered, Sakura thought perhaps he was sitting upon her desk now.

“Why is that?” Sakura asked. He remained silent. “Fujin, you can tell me. What’s going on?”

“Well, it’s just…I’ve watched several of the town’s citizens collapse abruptly. I’d thought that they would come here for treatment, of course. Is that not the case?”

Sakura swallowed around her tight throat. “No, I hadn’t been informed. Thank you for letting me know.”

Fujin stayed with her for a while, chattering on about some inanity or another. When he noticed her lack of attention, he huffed warm winds against her face before leaving the clinic.

Sakura followed after him, locking the door to the clinic before taking a seat on one of the examination tables. She pressed her face into her hands and breathed deep, trying to center herself. It seemed that whatever was afflicting Naruto spread to the rest of the town. She couldn’t think of any illness that could do such a thing to supernatural beings like the townspeople. What was going on in Pompeii?

Sakura bit down on her lip until it bled.

Whatever it was, it clearly wouldn’t be shared with her. They didn’t trust her. And Sakura could certainly understand why.

She was the outsider, the interloper.

Sakura didn’t belong in Pompeii.

She’d known that on some level for quite some time now. After all, didn’t the very bones of Pompeii, its forest, hunt and hate her? Why did it surprise her that many of its denizens followed suit?

Try as she might, her hands did very little to muffle her sobs as they echoed around the empty clinic.
Sakura wasn’t sure how much time passed before she became aware of a persistent tapping at the door. She swiped at her eyes, splashing her face with cold water and surveying her face. Her eyes were red and it was obvious that she’d been crying. However, she didn’t have the time for vanity as she hurried out to the front. Two men she’d never seen stood outside the door, faces blank.

One’s face was mostly obscured by a set of goggles, tufts of dark hair sticking out above it. The other was taller, with long red hair and pale brown eyes. This was the one who tapped upon the door in a concise rhythm.

Sakura unlocked the door, letting in the two men.

“How may I help you?” Sakura asked.

“I am known as Torune,” the dark haired man said. “This one is known as Fu. We require assistance.”

“Of course,” Sakura replied, snapping to attention.

Fu stepped forward, proffering his leg. He pulled up the leg of his pants, exposing a substantial third-degree burn.

Sakura was surprised that he was even able to walk.

“Follow me,” she said, glancing askance at Torune as he moved to follow as well.

“He will accompany me,” Fu said, face still slack despite the obvious pain the burn must be causing him.

Sakura nodded, setting him up in one of the examination rooms before pulling on her gloves. She rifled through the potions on the shelves, pulling free a pale blue poultice with a consistency like molasses.

“This will numb the pain and negate any further damage to the flesh,” Sakura said, unscrewing the lid. She used tweezers to pick up a swab, dipping it into the potion. Even with the distance between herself and the potion, Sakura could feel the chill rising off of it. “From there I will be able to apply a regenerative potion. Do you have any questions?”

“Your eyes are red and bloodshot,” Fu said, staring at her. “Do you have allergies?”

“Have you recently partaken in cannabis?” Torune asked.

Sakura snorted at their unexpected questions, even as she continued applying the poultice to Fu’s burn. “I was crying,” Sakura admitted, surprised that it hadn’t been there first guess.

“Crying,” they both repeated, canting their heads to the side at the same time.

Sakura couldn’t help it, she laughed and laughed until there were tears springing to her eyes again. She placed down the tweezers, hands shaking. Torune leaned in, drawing a gloved hand across the corner of her eye and collecting the tears.

“Fascinating,” he said.

When she finally caught herself, she finished Fu’s treatment rather quickly, bandaging the wound. She couldn’t help but be impressed. Not once during the treatment had Fu expressed any sign of pain, not even a flinch.
She completed a prescription note and passed it to Fu, saying, “Make sure to change the dressing every other day. Run by Chiyo’s and get your prescription filled. With the regenerative treatment, your wound should be gone in a week, week and a half at most. Come back by if you see any signs of infection.”

Both men nodded.

“Thank you, Dr. Haruno,” Fu said.

“And where should I direct the bill?”

“Danzo will take care of it,” Torune said. “Goodbye Dr. Haruno. We will see you again soon.”

Sakura checked her phone once more, making sure she was moving in the right direction. She was on the other side of Lake Icarus, in an area of Pompeii that once boomed with industrial prosperity. Pompeii was at one point a leader in the logging industry, as small pockets of supernatural beings moved into the town and found prosperity in the honest work. As the community was built up into the thriving civilization it currently was and the States began to import many of their goods, the logging business fell to the wayside, making way for the varied small businesses that made up the community of Pompeii.

Ahead, Sakura could see several towering, brick work buildings. They were all in various stages of disrepair and covered in telltale burn marks on both the exterior and interior. There’d been a skirmish here between the Uchiha and Senju and the fire damage was the remaining proof of it. A sense of unease crept up Sakura’s back as she walked down the dirt path between the buildings, taking in the gouges to the ground left from decades of hauling logs along the same path. This was a forgotten place, a reminder of the fickleness of supernatural beings. As soon as something ceased to be new and exciting, it was abandoned. Sakura could relate.

So too, she knew, could the transients.

They’d been mentioned in passing by Yamato as he discussed his former duties for the Senju. One of which was making sure that no one trespassed on the Senju compound.

Sakura hadn’t the slightest idea up until this point that there was a disproportionately large homeless population in Pompeii. She’d never encountered it during her exploration of the town nor in her clinic. From what Yamato said, it seemed there was a reason for that.

Sakura couldn’t help but wonder what else she’d been blind to, the amorality that undergirded the opulence of Pompeii.

(The trees weren’t the only vicious thing in Pompeii. Frankly, the people were much more worrisome.)

It was as Sakura approached the boat house that was on the verge of collapse that she saw a flicker of movement.

Sakura turned, casting her eyes up to the old watchtower. It was a tall, spindly thing and Sakura was surprised to find it still standing as it looked like a mere breeze could blow it asunder. There were multiple flat platforms leading up to the top, connected by sets of ladders. At the crest of the tower was a sort of roost, a lookout point from which a keen eyed individual once monitored the logging process. She clutched her seeing stone, catching faint trails of pink energy around the legs of the tower. At the top of the tower, Sakura could make out tendrils of long brown hair.
Sakura set about climbing the tower, tucking her bag against her side as she scampered from one ladder to the next. The wind coming off the lake buffeted her as she climbed higher and higher until, finally, she stood on the platform below the roost. There was a sort of door in the floor of the roost that Sakura pushed open as she climbed through. She looked up into the wary faces of four strangers.

All were dressed in ill-fitting, threadbare garments that hung loosely about their limbs. There was a gaunt look to them, a hunger that ran bone-deep. Sakura now saw that the wisps of hair belonged to the sole woman in the group who looked up at her with baleful dark eyes.

“What do you want?” one of them, his face covered in bandages, demanded, leaping to his feet. “What could you possibly want from us?”

Sakura stayed in her position low to the ground, holding up her empty hands. “I don’t want anything from you. I brought some items with me I’d like to give you. If you’re willing, I’d like to give you a physical check-up and make sure you’re doing well.”

He laughed, the sound grating with anger. “We know better than to trust doctors around here.”

Sakura looked between them all, taking in their resolute expressions before nodding. “Very well. I’ll just leave these things here and go,” Sakura said as she reached for her bag.

As she did so, the bandaged man’s arms came up and she saw the glint of silver before she heard a high-pitched whistling. Sakura frowned for a moment as her ears began to ring and suddenly she was falling over, clutching at the side of the roost. She brought a shaky hand up to her ear, staring as it came away tacky with blood.

“What did you do?” Sakura asked, voice distant and garbled even to herself. It was as if she was speaking underwater. “How did you rupture my eardrum?”

“With the ‘blessing’ the last doctor in Pompeii gave me,” he replied, moving over to her side.

“Dosu, what the hell are you doing?” the woman in the group hissed. “If anyone in town finds out…”

“Remember what happened last time?” one asked. Sakura wasn’t sure if it was the disorientation or not, but it looked like he had six arms. “We can’t afford another purge.”

“Shut up!” Dosu snapped, pulling her bag roughly from Sakura’s shoulder. She didn’t protest, merely holding her ear. “What have we here?” He stopped as he surveyed the bag’s contents, turning an assessing eye back to Sakura.

“What is it?” the woman asked, standing up and making her way over.

“She wasn’t lying,” Dosu said, voice soft and unreadable.

Sakura blinked as something was thrust into her face. A hand. She took Dosu’s hand, allowing him to pull her to her feet once more. Sakura nearly fell against him, her equilibrium thrown by her perforated eardrum. He braced her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as he assisted her over to the rest of the group. They all made space for her upon the pallets and furs they had gathered in this corner of the roost.

“Sorry about Dosu,” the six-armed man said, glaring at Dosu. “He means well but he is far too hasty.”

Dosu made a response, but it wasn’t one that Sakura could hear, seeing as he sat to her right side.
“I should be the one apologizing,” Sakura replied. “I didn’t even stop to think how my approach could be seen as threatening. I am sorry for frightening you.” All of them paused in their brewing argument, just looking at her. “Here,” Sakura said, taking the bag from Dosu and opening it up. She wanted a distraction from the weight of their stares. “I brought a few blankets with me. I have some coats back at home as well, but I wasn’t sure about sizes. Oh, and I have some food items!” Sakura began doling out the items, until she reached the bottom of the bag.

She pulled her stethoscope free, looking at the four individuals. “I know that you’ve been mistreated in the past by doctors and for that I am truly sorry. I cannot begin to imagine the betrayal you experienced at that doctor’s hands. Please, I ask that you will consider receiving a check-up. I will be as quick and noninvasive as possible.”

They all exchanged looks for a moment before the woman moved forward, situating herself in front of Sakura. “I’m Kin,” she introduced. “I would be happy to receive a physical from you.”

Sakura quickly set to work, making the best of the unconventional circumstances. Now that they’d deemed her a non-threat, the group was rather lively, making sure to introduce themselves: Dosu, Kidomaru, Kin, and Zaku. With her perforated eardrum, Sakura only caught snippets of the conversation that swirled around her, but she appreciated their general good cheer.

As Sakura brushed Kin’s hair away from her back, Kin flinched, hand clamping down on the side of her neck. Everyone fell silent as Sakura withdrew her hands.

Sakura’s eyes caught on the side of Kin’s neck. There was a bandage there, in a similar position to the one she saw on Juugo just a few weeks ago. As Sakura covertly looked over the others, she found similar bandages in the same area.

“What happened to you all?” Sakura asked, voice soft with empathy. “Who did this to you?”

“Orochimaru,” Kidomaru said, arms folding in disgust.

“Kabuto,” Dosu said at the same time.

“Kabuto?” Sakura asked, unfamiliar with the name.

“The last doctor in Pompeii,” Zaku said, speaking up for the first time aside from introductions. “He was twisted, thought he could bend the laws of reality and unreality to his vision...by the time his experiments were discovered, it was too late for many of us.”

“What happened to him?” Sakura asked.

“He was destroyed,” Kidomaru replied, grim satisfaction in his face. “Consumed by his experiments until not a trace of him was left upon this plane of existence.”

“How does this relate to Orochimaru?”

“Kabuto was a fanatic follower of the snake,” Kin replied, lifting the bandage at her shoulder. Three tear shaped dots were arranged in a circle. “He followed meticulously in Orochimaru’s footsteps, branding us as the monsters among monsters.”

“And now you live here?” Sakura asked, treading lightly.

Dosu snorted. “Kabuto chose his targets well; none of us were attached to large, established clans. We didn’t have roots in Pompeii, so when the time came and all was revealed...well, it was easy enough to uproot us and sweep us into the cracks.” Sakura was almost certain he was smiling.
beneath the bandages. “We’re weeds after all.”

Sakura stood to her feet abruptly, lurching to the right as her lack of balance made itself known.

“Sakura?”

“No,” Sakura said. “You aren’t just something that can be tossed aside!” She traipsed recklessly toward the hatch in the floor, oblivious to the way that Kidomaru’s arms came up on both sides of her, ready to catch her should she fall. She stopped beside the hatch, gesturing out to the abandoned logging mill. “So they decided to overlook you and leave you to rot, fine. You’re made of sterner stuff; you’re weeds dammit!” Sakura grinned, looking at them again. “Do you know what weeds do best? They come back again and again, making those inhospital cracks a home.”

“What do you plan to do?” Zaku asked, watching her with wide eyes.

“We’re gonna make this place a home,” Sakura replied.

Sakura marched back toward her apartment, joy making her light and airy. Her plans were coming along quite nicely, thanks to the efforts that both Sai and Yamato made to assist. It had been a rough start truthfully, especially when they realized that her eardrum was ruptured. Still, with a quick recovery to the injury and some fast talking on Sakura’s part, they made peace with the idea of helping.

The two of them were still at the logging mill, assisting Dosu and the others in making the place truly habitable once more.

She just had to grab a few items, the journal among them, and she’d be heading back to continue the rebuilding process. As she rounded to the front of the clinic, Sakura paused as she took in the sight of a nondescript black vehicle. Among the luxury cars of Pompeii, it stood out in its plainness.

Trepidation rising, Sakura’s gaze moved toward the door where she met bright red eyes.

“Tobirama said, mouth firm and gaze hard.
Sakura stepped aside, lips shut like a pretty straight line as she gestured with her hand to the door before her. She turned and headed inside before he could move, not waiting for him to catch up with her and follow her inside. She knew he would. He wasn’t far behind her anyway, stuck to her like a shadow at twilight.

Sakura glanced behind her and saw the Senju peeling the long trench coat off and folding it over one arm while glancing about, possibly searching for a coatrack. There was one in the corner, but he didn’t move to hang his coat there and Sakura didn’t offer to take it for him.

“I have a small office in the back if you think we need it,” Sakura said.

“Are there windows where those birds can watch you?”

Sakura considered the question before her eyes traveled to the nearest window. Outside on a tree branch across the road and further than before, a pair of black birds perched. It was nothing in comparison to what it once was, meaning the Uchiha were either truly shedding their interest in her or becoming more sneaky about it. She hadn’t seen any birds from Itachi ever since the incident where she broke her wrist. That seemed so long ago now.

“You can see for yourself,” Sakura said, suddenly realizing she was in no mood to humor anyone anymore, much less Tobirama and his brother. The whole idea of the Senju was pissing her off lately.

That sentiment only flared when she saw him stopping by the stairs that led up and glaring at the second floor. His nostrils flared like he could smell something and his knuckles turned white as he bunched them at his side. She could guess what he was sensing or smelling and it didn’t make her any more hospitable.

“He’s not here right now, if he’s who you were looking for,” Sakura sighed, eyes sliding off to the side, refusing to meet his.

“I wasn’t—” Tobirama stopped himself and swallowed. When he spoke again his voice had more depth to it, making it sound more official. “I’m not here to see anyone but you. I’m glad I was able to talk with you like this, without interruption.”

Sakura wasn’t sure that if Yamato had been in the building she would be speaking with Tobirama so easily. She could already imagine the standoff.

From the stories he told her, and what Sakura heard from Yamato, the younger brother was worse than the older brother when it came to vicious attitudes. Hashirama did more to command and control Yamato, but Tobirama had deep racist veins all through him. Tobirama was more of an elitist than his brother because ‘that made sense.’

Yamato told her other things, things that made it hard to stand being in the same room as Tobirama. He wasn’t like her and didn’t see the world the same way, but that was no excuse to act and behave the way he had in the stories.

“I can’t promise we won’t be interrupted, but my office is pretty private. We’re closed today, but emergencies keep their own hours, so I can be called away at a moment’s notice.”
Sakura laid her hand on the door and pushed it open before stepping aside to let him pass. He nodded his head in her direction, almost smiling before slipping past her.

“Can I offer you anything, tea, coffee, water?”

“No need. I am sated, but thank you.”

Sakura nodded, taking the mug on the end of her desk and holding it under the water tank to fill it up. “As you wish. Now, I’ve already guessed this isn’t a medical visit. What can I help you with?”

“How are you feeling?”

Sakura felt put off by his question. He asked her that like they were old friends catching up. He sounded so soft and kind, it made her skin crawl, but not for the usual reasons.

“I’m fine, did you come here just to ask that?”

“No, of course not. But, I have been concerned about you recently and wished to ascertain your state of well being for myself. I am glad you are doing well given the circumstances.”

“Given the circumstances?” Sakura echoed. “What do you mean by that?”

“Many of the people in Pompeii have not been well. Doctors often catch with the things they try to heal. You treated young Naruto several times before his collapse, did you not?” he asked.

It didn’t feel like a question when he phrased it.

“That’s something you would know,” Sakura huffed, leaning back in her seat and drinking the cold water from her mug, not caring how it didn’t seem to fit. She would need to stay hydrated to just put up with his bullshit.

“The Senju is very close with the Uzumaki family, as we are distant relatives. We are also neighbors.”

“You’re also agents.” Sakura inclined her head to punctuate her point.

“Yes, we are also agents charged with safeguarding our home. You can understand that.”

Sakura let her eyes shut. “Yes, I can understand that. I even understand how you work so well with the Uchiha to get ahead of matters like Orochimaru. Good job on that front.”

“Thank you.”

Sakura hid her souring smile in her mug, hating how her sarcastic comment didn’t register with the Senju fae. Maybe it was better he didn’t recognize how she was sassing him to his face. She needed to be better about controlling her emotions lest she fall back into that biting asshole of a person she knew she could be when she ran out her last fuse.

She drank her water and he swallowed before speaking.

“How have your living arrangements been agreeing with you?”

Sakura set the now empty mug down and the weight of it made a sound that served just as well as an answer for him. “I’m not sure you came all this way to talk to me about my new neighbors. What are you doing here? Let’s not waste anymore time on small talk. I can’t stand it anymore.”
“You’re upset.”

“Brilliant deduction. That all you came to see?”

“What have you been doing in the forests?”

Sakura waved her hand next to her head. “Walking, hiking, exploring. You tell me, you creep around and watch me the most. What am I doing out there that has you so spooked? I can’t tell anymore. You said you had some questions.”

“I wanted to also ask you why you’re not sick.”

“I don’t know that either. There’s nothing more I can see to these allergies but I know there’s more to it, I just can’t tell what.”

He nodded. “And your immunity….”

“What do you mean immunity?” Her voice was almost snappy.

“How many citizens do you believe have displayed symptoms?”

“I’ve treated a couple dozen.” Sakura narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

Tobirama folded his fingers and rested his elbows on the arms of his chair. “Nearly one third have displayed serious to mild symptoms as of this morning. Last week it was a little over one fourth, but it’s a situation that’s been rapidly compounding. We do not know how to help these people other than discover the source and purify it.”

“Purify?” She didn’t like the word when he said it like that. It came out of his mouth sounding like a threat. “What the hell does that mean?”

He blinked at her, a slow steady gesture that made her feel stripped bare. She felt like he had done more than seen her in nakedness, but rather flayed her skin and peeled it back to expose all the inner workings of her body and soul...every dark and rotted corner of it. Like an eternal creature full of majesty and grace, he sized her up, and found her wanting.

“It means the situation is serious.”

His voice was so suddenly cold.

“Then you think there is a source to this, like a strain or a nexus that can easily be eradicated? Plagues don’t work like that. Diseases don’t stop or end when you kill the first carrier rat, they exist outside of their mother source.” Any doctor would know that.

“I see. You would know.”

Sakura clicked her tongue and tapped her fingers to the edge of the desk. “Yeah, I would. I’m the doctor, remember?”

He tilted his head, observing her. “Yet you haven’t been able to help a single soul, remember?”

It stung. Maybe in the past few months as the allergies morphed into something more serious, her usefulness diminished in the wake of her inadequacies as a doctor, but she hadn’t been completely useless for the whole year. She had done some good. She had been good. She had, she had, she had!

“Is this what you came here to do?” Sakura asked, hating how her lips curled. “You came here to lay
this at my feet and blame me? That’s why no one is coming anymore. I’m not stupid, I know what they’re saying. I get it. I’m the outsider in the town where doctors have always been bad news. I get it.”

Her laugh was wet but she didn’t let it show in her eyes.

“Tell me you didn’t do this.”

“I didn’t do this!” Sakura all but snarled. “Of course not.”

He didn’t move, didn’t even twitch as he spoke. “Then prove it.”

“I can’t. I—I’m trying to help. I’m trying to be helpful in this place. I didn’t want to see anyone get hurt. If I could wipe away everyone’s sickness I would. I’m trying. I’m doing what I can.”

“You’re colluding with vagabonds, villains, and traitors in your free time.” He flipped some photos onto her desk, taken from a distance. The one at the top of the messy stack was of her with Yamato, smiling on the sidewalk and doing nothing more incriminating than that, but the others were of her leaving with supplies, walking into the forest, climbing the watchtower, and so on. None of it was damning, but Sakura could see how this would strike someone from the elite circles.

“What were you doing talking with these people?” He pointed to a photo of her with dosu.

“I was helping them. No one else would.”

“There is a reason for that. We know who are friends are and we know who our enemies are. Which are you, Sakura?”

Sakura felt heat in her heart and in her face. She stood slowly.

“Am I being charged with something?” she asked, tone steely.

Tobirama stood to match her. “Not at this moment. I would like you to come forward with any information you might have that might shed more light on the matter. Charges can be dealt later, but what is most pressing right now is helping the citizens. Naruto has only regained consciousness a handful of times but remains nearly comatose. He muttered your name once. Was he calling for you or was he identifying his attacker?”

Sakura wished she could land her fist in his face and watch it implode from the force of the blow. She wanted to see him clutching a broken nose and looking surprised. She wanted to see him hurt and change that damn expression. He watched her with unwavering fae eyes that made her skin shiver and her blood boil.

“If you’re done here you can leave.”

“Where will you be going?” he asked, sounding like it was his business.

“You don’t need to ask if you’re going to spy and sneak around anyway, do you? Why would I bother telling anything to you. You’re just like Yamato said you were.”

It was the first sign of his composure crumbling. There was a reaction in his eyes and a shift in his posture. He leaned into her and his brows raised a fraction for a new expression she wasn’t used to seeing on his face. He was one of the least expressive people she ever met, but she could tell that Yamato’s name meant something to him.
“He doesn’t know a damn thing about me,” Tobirama said, sounding like he was trying to convince her.

“He said you would say that too. You’d say something about how he could never comprehend you because the differences were so great. Whatever. You know it’s not me doing this, but you’re here harassing me and asking me stupid pointless questions that just make me feel sick. Get out and find the real answer to this problem.” Sakura waved her hand between them, motioning for distance.

“You’re only incriminating yourself by choosing him. I could have helped you if you came to me. You never said anything about yourself so what else can I do but ask questions. You’ve never shared with anyone else what you are, have you?”

It wasn’t appropriate when Itachi said it and it sure as hell wasn’t appropriate when he asked it too. She wanted to kick him between the legs, watch him double over, and driver her elbow into his back. She wanted to see him crumple. She wanted to see his filthy mouth fill with blood and broken teeth. How dare he!

“What I am is no one’s damn business. I’m Sakura. I’m the damn doctor. That’s it, now get out of my clinic!”

“Failing to come forward only incriminates yourself further.” He grabbed his coat and turned one leg to the side, getting ready to move.

“You wanna search my place then get a warrant.”

“Escalating things to that point would not be wise. It would be best if you gave you freely and of your own will. I could help you if you came forward.”

“I’ve got nothing to come forward with. Leave me and Yamato alone. He’s done with you and so am I.”

And she saw it. She saw the hurt there, real and honest and true and more clear than anything she’s ever seen on Tobirama Senju’s face. But it was gone in a flash, and so was he.

If this is what feelings felt like he didn’t want it.

With each step down the front stairs he could feel the echo jarring his heart, like the cavity in his chest was scraped clean and left empty, raw and bleeding from the butchery that left him void. He could hear his breath in his ears like it rattled his bones that much louder.

Damn

Damn

Damn

He saw her face in his mind and all the different flushes of anger that he was responsible for. He had put those tears behind her lashes there. He had made her lips curl and he had made her teeth bare at him with angry words.

But it wasn’t his fault. He had been trying to help her. She didn’t know better, she couldn’t. It was clear she was tied to the events, and it was highly likely she was the very cause of the ill in the population, but he wanted to believe that it was something she couldn’t help, or something she did
without thought.

He was there for that. He was there to save her, but she spurred him. He had meant to be that mythic shining knight in armor so bold it made all the stories come true. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. She wasn’t supposed to get angry at him like this. She was supposed to thank him, come clean with everything, and….and...and…

He stopped as something painful tore his heart open. He lurched on the last few steps and clutched his heart. Was it bleeding, was it ripped, was it torn? He gasped, looking up to the sky and seeing all the usual colors while the pain ebbed away.

The thought of her in his arms made him hurt. She wasn’t something to be taken likely, whatever she was. The dream of her was enough to wound. He needed to get back and speak with his brother. Harashima needed to be briefed on the events.

Tobirama stepped down onto the sidewalk and turned down to where his car had been parked. He reached in his pocket for the keys, feeling the cold of the metal and thanking the ancestors for the normalcy of it. Metal singed his fingers, but he needed that reality. He was in need of grounding if she had undone him this much.

Sly vixen.

He slipped into the driver’s seat and started the car. There was no one else on the road so it shouldn’t have been an issue to cut the wheel and pull out onto the street, but there was a horrible snapping and straining sound. The wheel refused to move more than an inch and in the next moment the car was lurched forward, trunk end extened up in the air half a foot. He heard more straining metal as she reached for the seatbelt and flashed out of his car with speed. He crouched and readied his screeching magic when he saw who was on the sidewalk.

All the pain came back tenfold, but this time it was burning as anger.

“You,” Tobirama hissed, lip curling in disgust. He burned for the fact that he was barred from flaying the creature in front of his, limb from limb, flesh from fleshy patch. He wanted to see him undone like a fish.

“You,” Yamato hissed back, just as nasty and dismissive with his tone. The roots curling out of the ground surged a little more and then halted, keeping the car in place.

“Are you finally here to bite, curr?”

“Don’t think I wouldn’t if I thought for one second you were a credible threat to her.”

Yamato’s eyes flashed with some dark and terrible power that was known and unknown. It was a power that went into the dark under the mountain, and came back with a little bit of the darkness. The roots groaned but didn’t move. Tobirama suspected there were other roots run wide and far beneath the asphalt and sidewalk, ready to destroy their whole city if the reject thought it would be what Sakura wanted.

It wasn’t fair that he slept mere feet from her and shared the same space with her. It wasn’t fair he saw her daily when Tobirama was lucky if he…

“You’re not good. The fact you’re here now only incriminates her further. That what you want, or is that how things go these day? Is she like you, something stolen and unnatural? Is that why no one knows?”
“You better not have made her cry. I’ll kill you.”

“Is that a threat? It doesn’t look good for her or you, now.”

“I don’t threaten. I kill in the dark and I make promises.”

His lip curled once more. The sight was enough to make Tobirama’s stomach churn, but something else made his gut a loose storm. “Sounds like a threat to me. Look how the filth barks, that’s new.” Tobirama lifted one hand. “You want to be put down and do this town a favor?”

The theory on the roots was sound as the ground was torn open and the power that made Hashirama feared as a god among the fae surged on bursts of red colored anger.

Tobirama made himself lightning, and when he stuck out with the white lightning, there was the imprint of a stag behind him, surviving in the shadow of the flash and then fading in the next nano second. He wasn’t going to hold back this time.

Neither did Yamato.

They were at each other’s throats and he could taste the burn in the air as well as the burn of wood from where lightning seared it bald. “You,” Yamato hissed, cheeks filling with hot breath as angry as his eyes. “You don’t get to talk to her. You don’t get to look at her. You’re a racist piece of shit and I’ll never let you touch her.”

“She’s hiding something,” Tobirama challenged.

“That’s her right.”

“Not here, not now. We have bodies.” Yamato pushed forward and they struggled. His eyes were wide and black like the underside of the earth he was born in. “I don’t care.”

“You’re evil,” Tobirama barked. “You’re dirty and not worth anything!”

“She doesn’t think that and if she’s the only one it’s more than enough.”

Yamato pulled up the roots between them and Tobirama disengaged. With distance separating them Yamato let the roots sink away out of sight once more, leaving scars in the earth. The street still smelled like battle.

Yamato pointed like his finger was filled with power, and it likely was. “Come back here and I’ll kill you. That’s a promise.”
“Concussion?”

Sakura stretched across the bed, tackling Ino as she moved to stand. She knew it was a bad idea to tell Ino, but a few daiquiris in and the story tumbled all too quickly from her lips. “Ino, it isn’t that big a deal, it’s fine.”

“Fine? It isn’t fine!” Ino’s voice took on a new cadence, deep and shrieking, overlaid. Sakura felt feathers bunch and shift beneath her grasp as Ino tried to stand from the bed. “Menma goddamn concussed you!” She stopped moving for a moment, looking at Sakura with large, sorrowful eyes. “I was there and I didn’t do anything. I knew you were hurt and I didn’t check in with you. Were you...did anyone help you with the concussion?”

“Sai and Yamato stayed with me,” Sakura reassured her, rubbing down Ino’s arms. Her arms were nearly full wings now, trailing off the bed. Her feathers were a beautiful eggshell white. “Ino, it’s fine. I understand you’ve been...busy. You’ve been out hunting right?”

Ino snorted, shaking out her hair. She was nearly vibrating with tension, but her touch was gentle as she brought her winged arms around Sakura. “If you call cleaning out a few empty cells and hidey-holes hunting. We’re doing what we can, but Orochimaru is a wily bastard who’s been at this for centuries longer than I’ve been alive.” She scowled, drawing fingertips through Sakura’s hair and brushing errant strands behind the shell of her ear. “That isn’t the real reason I’ve been away.”

Sakura’s stomach swooped low and heavy. So they’d reached the crux of the matter then? “I know.”

“Dad’s been freaking out. The Uzumaki and Senju have been telling him...well, all sorts of nonsense. I know, I know it isn’t true,” Ino said, looking frustrated. “He called a family council and I’ve spent the last week slogging through patronizing speeches from relatives who haven’t even met you. I...well, they’re going to leave it alone for the time being.”

Sakura’s heart lifted as she read between the lines. Ino spent the past week defending her to her family and, from the rings beneath her eyes, Sakura could tell she was exhausted. Sakura grabbed Ino’s clawed fingers gingerly, grinning up at her. “Thanks Ino.”

Beneath her hold, Sakura felt the feathers shift and plume, flaring up her arms in a shiver until they crested Ino’s neck in a fan. Her hands shifted, dropping Sakura’s as she leaned in and surrounded Sakura in feathers.

They were impossibly soft, shifting and ruffling across Sakura’s skin as Ino enclosed her in a tight hug. She dropped her head to Sakura’s shoulder, exhaling away a week’s worth of tension and anxiety. “I will always, always have your back, Sakura. Never doubt that.”

Something within Sakura lurched, melting away bits of the tense knot within the pit of her stomach. She was still uncertain of her place here in Pompeii, but Sakura knew now that she’d always have a place with Ino.

Sakura flipped through the pages of art, humming to herself. Konan’s art was immaculate, illustrative fantasy brought to life with ink upon skin in vibrant colors and confident lines. Though, Sakura realized with a wry twist of her lips as she eyed the depiction of a kitsune, perhaps illustrative fantasy
wasn’t the right term.

Illustrative reality more like.

“Konan possesses adequate skill in tattooing,” Sai said beside Sakura’s shoulder. Despite his words, Sakura could see the way his eyes sparkled as they traced along a tattoo of a dragon. “She uses color well.”

Sakura nudged Sai, grinning. “I’m sure she’d be willing to teach you.”

“She certainly will,” a soft voice said. “Konan has always had a gift for teaching.”

The duo turned, greeted with the sallow grin upon Nagato’s face. He sat heavily in one of the chairs, hand pressed to his side. *Ink Inc.* was a joint effort between Nagato and Konan, a couple that Sakura was quickly realizing owned a few businesses in town, including the Waffle Shack. Nagato’s style of tattooing was strict traditional, both American and Japanese while Konan embraced illustrative and watercolor styles.

Sai, as a black and white artist, was a perfect fit to join their team as the resident black and grey tattoo artist.

And, thankfully, his sometimes abrasive and abrupt attitude was accepted with ease among the tattooing community.

“How are you, Nagato?” Sakura asked, brow knitting with concern.

“As well as ever,” Nagato said, standing with a groan as he clutched at his ribcage. “Don’t worry about me. I’m heading over to the Shack, you want anything?”

Sakura and Sai shook their heads, waving Nagato off as he went to check in with Konan.

“How about you, Sai?” Sai asked, watching Sakura peruse the books.

Sakura shrugged, keeping her eyes on the tattoo of an eagle grappling a snake. “Maybe. I’ve fiddled with the idea over the years. I just didn’t think it best to get one during medical school, what with all the crushing debt and the like.”

“And now?” Sai asked.

“Maybe,” Sakura said. “I’ve always wanted an anatomical heart.”

“I’ll draw something,” Sai said immediately, sitting down to sketch.

Sakura’s lips quirked up at the corners, watching him at work. His expression was soft and nearly open, more so than he ever was when he was in conversation with others. This was his element, his safe place, and Sakura appreciated that he let her even be part of this with him. She took a seat, eyes falling to half mast as she drifted, soothed by the near constant buzz of the needles in the side rooms.

Sakura blinked back to wakefulness as the bell above the door tinkled, announcing a new customer. She turned, smiling as Sasuke stepped into the tattoo parlor, shaking water free from his hair and wings.

The smile quickly faded in the face of his thunderous scowl and the way he stormed toward her, feathers ruffled high in agitation. She stood, jumping when Sasuke opened his mouth and a high-pitched screech resounded through the room, making Sakura’s ears ring.
“Sasuke?” Sakura said, folding in on herself.  

“What the hell did you do?” Sasuke demanded, arms flying out in a clear bid for intimidation.

It was working.  

“Do?” Sakura asked weakly.  

Sasuke’s jaw clenched so tightly she could hear his teeth creaking. “Itachi,” he hissed out.  

“What’s happened to Itachi?” Sakura asked, stepping forward toward Sasuke despite his aggression. “Is he alright?”  

“He’s not alright and you know it!” Sasuke said. “He’s fallen ill with the same sickness that’s taken hold of Naruto and the rest.” He grabbed her wrist, clawed fingertips digging into the flesh. “What did you do?”  

“I didn’t do anything,” Sakura protested, ignoring the pain that flared from her wrist. “I’m doing what I can to cure this but I’ve had little success so far.” The shame of her inadequacy burned deep in her chest, flushing her cheeks with its heat. “Please, bring Itachi to the clinic; I can examine his symptoms...or I can come to him, up to your house-”  

“You are not welcomed there,” Sasuke said, eyes red and turning with his anger. “You will not infect the others, you parasite.”  

Sakura yanked her arm from Sasuke’s grasp, ignoring the way her sleeve darkened as blood pooled to the wounds. “Sasuke, I just want to help,” she said, averting her eyes as the guilt hit her again. There was so little she could do. Hadn’t she been working at this for weeks? And what did she have to show for it? A litter of unanswered questions and unfulfilled promises. She wasn’t a good doctor. “Please.”  

“Help?” He glanced at their surroundings and let loose a bitter chuckle. “You seem hard at work helping here.” Sasuke turned his attention to her again and scoffed. “You can’t even meet my eyes.”  

Sakura swallowed, preparing to respond as Sai moved between them, tucking Sakura against his side.  

“Leave Uchiha,” he said, slate eyes alight with barely bedded fury. “You are not welcome here, nor are you wanted.”  

“I see your mongrel is still healthy,” Sasuke sneered, pinwheel eyes focused unerringly on Sakura. “You should put him down now. Mutts always bite the hand that feeds them.”  

Sakura caught the tensing of Sai’s shoulders before she pressed past him, getting up into Sasuke’s face. “That is incredibly cruel, Sasuke! How dare you speak to him like that?” she said, temper and voice rising in tandem. “What would Itachi say if he heard you speaking like this?”  

The feathers at Sasuke’s neck ruffled as he went stark white and, for a moment, Sakura thought he would strike her. Then, he turned, stomping out into the rain before taking to the skies.

Sakura sighed, all the fight draining from her as she turned back to Sai. His eyes were a bit wide as he scrutinized her. He caught sight of the blood running down her wrist and snapped to attention, grabbing bandages (which *Ink Inc.* had in abundance) and a basin of water. Sakura glanced around as he did this, trying to figure out why something felt off.
As he fussed over her and bullied her into a chair, Sakura closed her eyes, realizing what was amiss.

All of the tattoo machines were turned off during the confrontation.

When the steady thrum of the machines filled the air once more, Sakura resigned herself to the scrutiny that was bound to arise from this altercation. As she was learning more and more, gossip spread like wildfire in Pompeii.

She could only hope that she wouldn’t be consumed in the ensuing flames.

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The days following Sasuke’s confrontation were tense as Sakura prepared herself to be subjected to all sorts of public humiliations. However, as the days stretched by monotonously, Sakura realized that there was a new game afoot.

A treatment of silence.

As she walked through town, Sakura felt many eyes upon her and could nearly feel the hushed whispers crawling across her skin, but none dared to approach. Instead, they watched her, eyes flaying her open and exposing all of her flaws and vulnerabilities. Sakura did what she could to ignore it, knowing that attempting to address the issue would only exacerbate things further.

People would believe as they wished and there was little she could do to change their minds.

Today she was heading to the library, to visit with Hiruzen and search out answers to this unexplained illness. Ino, Sai, and Yamato had each volunteered to join her but she turned them down firmly, understanding well that they couldn’t put their lives on hold for her sake. She wouldn’t want them to.

Besides, she could handle silence well. It was once a familiar friend. And so it seemed, based on the way people scurried away from her, it soon would be so again.

The abrupt appearance of scrawl reading Sarutobi Library was a welcome distraction as the library formed in front of her. Sakura climbed up the steps two at a time, grinning wryly at the strange building. She rather thought she’d learned its favorite haunts, as it had appeared in the cross streets of Sage and Walnut for her past three visits.

“Hiruzen?” Sakura called out, crossing through the open doors into the library. “Hello?”

“Hello again Sakura,” Hiruzen said, stepping out of his office and wiping his hands in a cloth. Sakura could see streaks of some dark substance upon his face as he grinned at her. “It is always a pleasure to see you.”

“You as well,” Sakura returned, heart warmed by his kind display.

“I’ve a few books that might be of interest to you,” Hiruzen said. “The library’s been leaving them on the tables at night in a rather passive-aggressive manner.” His tone was affectionate as he cast his gaze up to the ceiling of the room. “You seem on quite good terms with the library.”

“Perhaps it enjoys my persistence,” Sakura said, following Hiruzen further into the library, cooling her heels as he rounded his desk and gathered a stack of books.

“Ay, I’d say it certainly does. In my years, I’ve yet to find a magic that didn’t do well alongside
stubbornness. It takes tenacity to thrive in the harsh conditions that magic creates.” His voice was casual, overly so, and Sakura’s face warmed. “It takes grit.”

“So you’ve heard,” Sakura said quietly.

“Ay, I have,” Hiruzen said. “I hear it well enough from Hashirama. His brother’s taken ill.”

“Tobirama has fallen too?” Sakura asked, feelings mixed. They’d parted on poor terms, but she still cared for his wellbeing. He hurt her, hurt Yamato, but still...at one point she’d considered him a friend. And then she remembered where Hiruzen received this information. “And what think you of me?”

Hiruzen hummed, stroking his beard. “I know little of the goings on within town. I do what I can to stay away. I have been involved before and I have lived long enough to see the cyclical patterns of the citizens’ attitudes. For near immortals, they are quite predictable.” At Sakura’s blank stare, he shook his head and chuckled. “Apologies. What I mean to say is that, thus far, everything is hearsay and gossip; there is little traction for these rumors. Besides, the land of Pompeii is a strange entity unto itself and I have seen that it is the best judge of character. I have seen people banished from the land by the land. Pompeii likes you; do you think this library appears for just anyone?”

“The library is a part of Pompeii’s magic?” Sakura asked, surprised.

“While my name is upon the building, I cannot claim ownership. Pompeii has graciously offered me stewardship after this manifestation of itself. I have worked here for centuries. The library dotes upon you, it enjoys your presence.” Hiruzen smiled and there was a wicked tilt to it. “I trust the library’s judgment much more than that of my… esteemed colleagues.”

Sakura returned his smile, accepting the books that he passed to her. As she moved to leave, Hiruzen grasped her hand, squeezing it warmly.

“I know that it currently feels as if the town has turned against you,” he said, eyes impossibly kind. “Keep in mind that the town itself, the very bones of Pompeii, is in your corner. That is no small thing.”

He released her and Sakura wished him goodbye before striding back toward the clinic. This time, as the stares and whispers reached her, Sakura was able to ignore them easily. Hiruzen’s quiet conviction buoyed her, centering her and reminding her of the big picture. This too would pass.

She just had to remain strong and resilient, like a weed.

Sakura paused as she reached the clinic, grasping the books tight to her chest. She bit her lip, taking in the sight before her.

The door to the clinic was thrown open and windows broken in. Sakura moved inside, surveying the damage. The cushioned seats of the waiting room were ripped opened, surgical instruments sticking out of them. Some sort of dark, faintly glowing substance coated the floor and walls, smeared across her desk and computer. Shizune’s desk was absolutely pristine. The filing cabinets were on the side and it appeared that someone tried to jimmy the locks, but thankfully the magical sigils had deterred them.

Sakura drifted, almost in a daze through the different examination rooms, taking note of the damage in a cold and distant way. One of the scales was destroyed, as were two stethoscopes. Claw marks raked the walls and furniture, leaving little salvageable. She calculated that the repairs that were required were easily in the thousands.
Slowly, Sakura climbed the stairs to her apartment. The walls were streaked in that strange black liquid and red paint, as well as various claw marks. She paused on the second to last step, looking at her doorstep. Strangely, the door itself was pristine, untouched by any of the damage. But the assailants made the most of her doorstep, gouging letters deep into the floorboards.

UNWELCOME!

The carved letters were traced over with red paint. Beneath the message lay the bell that hung above the clinic’s door, warped and twisted. She picked it up, keyed into her apartment, and closed the door behind her.

“Why have you called this meeting?” Yamato asked, looking up at Hashirama from the seat he lounged in.

Anxiety roiled in his chest, brought on by his surroundings. He hated the Senju compound and all the memories associated with it. Sakura was away visiting the library and somehow Yamato wasn’t all that surprised that Hashirama cornered him and asked him here. Ever the opportunist, that Hashirama.

“Must you even ask? What don’t you understand about the situation? We need your help,” Hashirama bit out, staring Yamato down. “Tobirama has fallen. You seem immune to the...wiles of the good doctor.”

“That’s rich,” Yamato said, arms crossed. “I am no longer affiliated with your clan. You and I may be bound by marrow and DNA, but I owe you absolutely nothing.”

For a moment, Yamato could read the surprise and sudden surge of anger on Hashirama’s face. Good. He had to be put in his place. Then it smoothed, clearing in that way that always spelled trouble for those around him. Damn Fay charisma. “And you care nothing for this town? Pompeii has sheltered you, offering you a home when you had none. There is no love lost between us, but what about Pompeii?”

Yamato laughed and it was cruel and vindictive to his own ears. He was beyond care though, adrenaline thrumming as he finally, finally told Hashirama off. “Sheltered me? No one here has ever cared about me, least of all you and your damn clan. I am the unwanted, the unmentionable. I am the reminder of your abhorrent failure. If you hadn’t failed, I wouldn’t exist.” He laughed and laughed, because if he didn’t, he would cry. Yamato didn’t think there were enough tears in the world. “And you know, for the majority of my existence I’ve wished you succeeded.”

Hashirama drew in a sharp breath but Yamato was nowhere near done.

“All of that changed when she came.” Yamato’s voice was soft, reverent. “She looked at me and saw me, not your failures, not the stain that Orochimaru left on this town. Even when she found out, she never made me feel like I was less than a person. I have now found innumerable reasons to live and that is thanks to her. Her kindness has given me the opportunity to make a life worth living.”

“But she’s behind all of this! People are dropping like flies and those damn trees keep growing and it’s her fault!” Hashirama shouted, composure broken in the face of Yamato’s brutal honesty.

“So?”

“So? Is that all you have to say?” Hashirama demanded.
Yamato slammed a hand down on the table, watching expressionlessly as the wood pinned Hashirama to the wall. They both knew it would be child’s play for Hashirama to get free. Still, the shock on his face said it all. In his arrogance, he still didn’t believe Yamato would dare to raise a hand against him. Yamato stepped closer, waiting until he had Hashirama’s full attention.

“I don’t care,” Yamato said. “Sakura may be the culprit and she may not be. I do not care either way. Pompeii can burn for all I care. If she wishes it, then yes, Pompeii will burn. Why is this so hard for you to understand?”

“She will kill hundreds,” Hashirama said.

Yamato shrugged.

“She will damn us all.”

Yamato moved even closer, pressing a hand to Hashirama’s chin and tilting his head up to make sure that Hashirama listened to him. “You damned me. Sakura is the single light within my world. If she wishes to see Pompeii destroyed, I will assist her in damning you all. I will not stand by and watch you extinguish my saving grace.”

So saying Yamato walked over to the door, flicking a wrist to force it off the hinges. He turned back to Hashirama as Hashirama rubbed his chafed wrists.

“Tread carefully,” Yamato said. “I am no longer your tool to use as you wish.”

“But you’re hers,” Hashirama spit.

“She doesn’t treat me as such,” Yamato replied. “You had my skill set; she has my loyalty.” So saying, Yamato flicked his fingers, blowing the door wide off its hinges. He moved through the threshold, pausing and looking back to Hashirama. “Do not attempt to overstep your bounds again. Next time, there will be no quarter.”
“Don’t waste my fucking time,” Sakura growled, looking down at the appointments booked for her morning.

No one was coming in, but she had noticed the trend of people booking appointments anonymously and then never showing up, getting her ready for an appointment and making her waste her time making the clinic clean and ready for patients.

She was sick of it.

In a moment of thankfulness she remembered to be glad that she was alone so no one could see her fall into a fit of frustration. She was becoming more and more irritated every time something like this happened. She was afraid what it would look like in another week or two. The whole town felt like it had turned on her. It had been weeks and nothing seemed to be getting better.

Sakura swore once more, falling into a seat and clicking on her computer screen to the lock screen. Her password loaded the homepages and she went to her email, reading the notices of her pending loan payments. She had enough in her savings for a few more, but soon she would have to start defaulting because the income wasn’t coming in.

Before December, she needed to turn things around before December.

Pushing away from the computer Sakura felt her body crave waffles and sugar. She bit back the craving and reminded herself that going out wasn’t a good idea anymore. She didn’t even go visit Sai anymore, even though she was proud of his work and his job. He was doing so well but she couldn’t go to where he was and make herself into a spectacle that could end up harming his reputation. He was doing so well. She couldn’t ruin it now.

Across the way under the paper there was the shadow of the red spray paint on her waiting room wall. Sakura swallowed, hating how she could still read it through the paper. She was ready for the attacks and the vandalism to stop.

Didn’t people have better things to do?

Sakura turned the radio on and listened with her heels propped up on the edge of her desk. Her flats were discarded off to the side and she didn’t care what she looked like in her office.

There was a small breeze and then she smelled moisture. She opened her eyes and then promptly narrowed them.

Pein was in the doorway, scowling at the things he saw in her lobby. He looked to her and there was a crumpled expression that Sakura couldn’t summon the emotion to compliment. She was in no mood to humor anyone.

“You here for an appointment?” Sakura asked.

“I had heard that things were rough for you. Konan mentioned some of the town being assholes as per usual. I didn’t know it was so bad that they would dare tread on your sacred places.”

Sakura snorted, keeping her heels propped up high. “You’ve come, you’ve seen. Anything else,
“They’re being disrespectful because they don’t know any better. They’re foolish and rash, thinking they’ll live forever on their own, when really they’re just as destined to die as any mortal. These things happen. You know this isn’t the first plague Pompeii has weathered.”

“It’s not a plague,” Sakura crumbled. “I don’t know what it is yet.”

“It’s a passing thing,” Pein answered. “Don’t concern yourself with it.”

“Kind of hard not to when it’s so close to home.” She looked back over at the wall covered in paper to hide the spray paint. “Literally.”

Pein took a step inside and brushed his fingers over the lapel of his coat before sliding it down his arm and then off his wrists. He folded it neatly and hung it at the crook of his elbow like a painting would. Today he seemed fit and tailored for admiring. She had seen him more rugged and casual, but today he was a bit more done up with gold at the edges clips of his lapel to match his cufflinks. His suit was charcoal and black pinstripes too fine to count. His shoes were brown leather wingtips too.

His hair was still a little wild, but with his elegant cheekbones and classical features of the face, he could pull it off. It was a little frustrating how beautiful he was.

“You look more dressed up than usual. What’s that for?” Sakura asked.

“The time of year. The Mabon tide has finally passed and I’m in a new era. This is just the flavor of my next decade or so. Does it not suit your tastes?”

Sakura didn’t understand what he was talking about, but shook her head and waved a hand in front of her eyes. “You look fine.”

“Thank you.”

She looked away. “Is there anything else I can help you with, or was there truly no purpose to showing up after all this time of wondering where you had run off to?”

She didn’t mean for her words to sound so sharp, but they passed through her lips just like that. She watched as his expression turned down and his lids lowered.

“Ah. The monsoon season called me away but...I had stayed away on my own without meaning to. I forgot to be mindful of the days. It is a poor habit of mine.”

Sakura remembered that Pein was a god of storms and rain, with an age as old as worship and a memory just as thin. A few months probably felt like days to him. She didn’t doubt he forgot about the time like a teenager without a watch would, only on a much grander scale.

“You’re angry with me.”

Sakura looked up at saw his face darken with concern. “I’ve offended you somehow?” he said.

There had been others who had offended her, Itachi and Tobirama came to mind, but Pein had merely annoyed her. She didn’t care what he did or that he didn’t tell her. He was his own person and he was free to do as he pleased.
“No, why would you say that?” she asked.

“You returned my gift. Was it not satisfactory? Did it not meet your expectations or was it too much. I had wondered if you desired something more practical to suit your modesty, but I had thought you would enjoy what I settled with.”

“The car was fine, that wasn’t the point,” Sakura sighed. “It was too lovely to keep.”

“I do not understand.”

“Damn it Pein, it was a car,” Sakura huffed, dropping her heels and leaning forward across the desk to be closer to him as they talked. “A car.”

“Yes, and it was something you had need of. You did not own one of your own, correct? I thought I was being thoughtful.”

“Pein, you can’t just give someone a car like that. It’s too much.”

He frowned. “I do not understand what the problem is.”

“I couldn’t accept a gift like that. It was too much for me.”

“It was a gift.” He said it so simply, like a child not understanding the concept of object permanence.

“It was too much,” Sakura tried to explain. “I couldn’t accept a gift so generous from you. It wouldn’t have been a good idea even if you meant it with the best intentions. When and if I ever need a car, I’ll acquire one on my own with my own efforts and own strength.”

“Then I’ve insulted you.”

Sakura felt the air escape her as she dropped her head into her hands and then sat up straighter to finger comb her hair back. She had a feeling there would be no easy way to get a god to understand what she meant. He didn’t understand and her efforts weren’t going to change that.

“It made me happy and I really liked it. I wasn’t insulted, but I have to do some things on my own with my own efforts. Plus, a gift that expensive would have implied something more than I’m willing to admit to in regards to our...relationship.”

Sakura saw something shutter across his expression and couldn’t catch the meaning behind it. He swallowed and composed himself too quickly.

“Ah, I didn’t know our relationship was so shallow. It seems only I took any delight in it.”

Sakura groaned, dropping her hands into her lap. “Pein, no, it’s not like that! I...I didn’t mean it like that. I didn’t want you to have an expectations from me when I wasn’t willing to...be like that with anyone. It’s all beside the point. I’m sorry. You’re a good friend and those are in short supply these days so please don’t be too upset with me.”

Pein nodded slowly, watching her before his eyes suddenly shifted to the windows where cardboard protected the places shattered by rocks. “I had noticed something amiss more so than usual. Who is it that takes issue with you?”

“It’s not so simple as that. There is this sickness that I can’t cure or even begin to understand. I can’t cure people when that’s what I’m supposed to be doing. What’s worse, some of my friends are blaming me for all this, though I don’t understand why.”
“I’m familiar with the conditions of this ailment. Are you behind it?”

Sakura felt a rush of anger. “What? No, of course not!”

Pein watched her without reacting. “Would you tell me if you were, or is our relationship not suited to such honesties.”

“Don’t make it sound like that. I swear, this isn’t me. I’ve never wanted to hurt anyone here or do anything to cause the people of Pompeii pain. I’m a doctor, I’ve taken oaths.”

“I don’t blame you if that’s the case, please don’t misunderstand. You could be an agent of reckoning for all I care. The fact that you are or are not behind these events matters little to me.”

Her throat felt fuzzy and she had to try and swallow more than once to manage it. “Do you think I’m behind this?”

“I can’t say,” Pein replied casually.

“You would think that of me?”

He took a step towards her and his height became apparent with how close he was now to her. She had to look back to stare up at his face. It was beautiful and smooth with all the right angels that would make even the angels weep with envy. Sometimes she thought he was too much, but then she remembered what he was.

“I am not something so trivial that the deaths of a few insects would bother me. I don’t care to consider your morality. In my own day and in my own times I have been the reckoning of a hundred people. I have been the starvation of a generation, the pestilence and the drought. I have been the torrent and the tide. Like the rain falls from the heaven so does my justice upon the lands that I behold. I am the storm. I am death.”

He reached for her face to hold it and Sakura felt fear at the touch. He was vibrating with energy she knew would tear her asunder if he so wished it. His eyes were spinning with danger.

“I am the wound and I am the balm to a multitudes of nations. My wrath is justice and my favor a fearful thing. What I do and where I go is beyond the bonds of good or evil. I am what I am and no morality may judge me. Understand this, Sakura. I would drown Pompeii if the whim took me. I don’t care for good and evil. Remember this when you think of me, if you ever do.”

He let her go like he was letting a dirty napkin go and Sakura felt something after the fear from being so close to him subsided. She felt angry again.

“I’m telling you the truth. It wasn’t me.”

“Fine. I’ll take you at your word, friend.”

His tone was cold and Sakura didn’t think he was really fine at all. He spoke as if he believed she was really behind everything and still trying to trick and lie to him. She didn’t know for sure, but she suspected that the thing that upset Pein so much wasn’t that she might be behind something so nasty, but that she wasn’t being honest with him about it. He was upset though, she could tell that much.

Sakura took a step back and fell into the chair again. “I wish I could make you believe me instead of just taking me at my word for it. I don’t want to see my friends get hurt. I don’t want to see this town suffer. Please...at least believe that.
When she looked up the room was empty. Pein was gone and there wasn’t even the smell of him left.

Sleep was nice, but Sakura found herself waking more naturally early and earlier. The sun was up and so was she, but she didn’t feel the need to move and rise out of her bed. Sakura turned over and pulled the blankets up under her chin.

There was no reason to get out of bed so she reached for one of the books at the foot of her bed and flipped it open. There was a healthy stack of books she had been flipping through and reading whenever she could make her mind focus well enough to understand words in a sequence.

It was funny how the history of Pompeii wasn’t a single history, but rather a collection of histories through different perspectives. One thing she read made her think of the current situation concerning of the Kiri boys.

Since the shit hit the fan they had been scarcely heard or see inside the town proper. They were a group that liked to pull away as soon as things looked bad, which was a pattern of behavior that was prominent all throughout their history in Pompeii. It made sense why she hadn’t seen or heard any of them in weeks. Last she heard, they were all healthy and fit and content to stay far away on the other side of the lake where the trees couldn’t reach them.

Trees were another issue.

Sakura put down one book and picked up another. She was looking through and searching for anything to do with trees, mutations in the foliage and fauna. It was hard and she wished she had a google search bar, but the items and mysteries were firmly buried. There was a reason the mysteries were mysteries and long and well as they were.

It was frustrating to find so little. She wanted answers that would tell her why she had been attacked almost a year ago for the first time, why she had her wrist broken, why the trees bled gold ichor, why they were flowing white and pink buds in the fall season, why so many people were getting ill from allergies. She wanted answers and she was afraid of what it meant. She was afraid that the answers she wanted were not in her room or safe between pages in a book. If she wanted answers she feared she would have to go out and get those answers herself with her own two hands.

Sakura shut the book on her lap, letting the papers flip one by one down until the cover came down. She eyed one more book and flipped it open on a hunch. It felt like a book she should flip open. It was about the earth before Pompeii was Pompeii and the civilizations that existed before. There were other towns like Pompeii around the world in different times and eras. Before Pompeii was a hub there were other safe havens that rose and fell and were outgrown. Sakura hated more and more the sentences that gave her less and less information on why and how they fell out of fame. Some just weren’t popular anymore, some were discovered by humans. Others fell to... disease.

“Whatver the hell that means.”

The doctor in her hated how heavily reliant the authors were on means other than medicine to treat their ailments. They used magic and when magic failed they admitted they were fuked. No one thought it was a good idea to document and record the symptoms. How hard could it have been to just draw some diagrams and record a few notes on the things that happen to the people and creatures in the town?

Idiots.
Sakura dressed and made herself breakfast. She didn’t think it mattered if she did herself up any, so she ate at the counter, standing up and watching the sunrise through the window.

There was a knock on the door and she waited a breath before hesitantly approaching the door. She breathed a sigh of relief when she recognize the sound of his nervous shifting.

“Sai,” she greeted. Sakura invited him in and they ate together.

“Did you hear about what happened to Naruto?” he asked after they had gone through a handful of english muffins.

Sakura licked the jam off her thumb. “Nah, I’m not in the loop, remember?”

Sai shrugged. “You hear things at the shop. Apparently a tree attacked him. That’s more rare.”

She looked down at her wrist. “Not that rare.”

“There was something else. Downstairs someone left a message scheduling an appointment today. I heard it before I came back upstairs.”

Sakura drank back a glass of milk and then set it aside, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “I get them all the time but no one shows up. Just ignore them. I’m here if someone decides to come through the door. Who was it?”

“That Zetsu character, the one Naruto was always bullying. He didn’t say what he needed, but He sounded like he was coming in later today. I’m sorry if it turns out to be just another trick.”

Sakura pushed away her empty plate. “Me too.”
“Zetsu,” Sakura greeted, unable to help her grin as the man stumbled through the front door. It had been a while since an appointment actually came to fruition. “How may I help you today?”

He glanced up at her and she saw now that he was muttering to himself, expression stormy. Sakura’s smile fell as he approached. She hoped that he hadn’t turned on her, not like the others.

“Zetsu?” she said, keeping her voice soft as she braced for the rejection that was about to come.

His eyes cleared and he shook his head, meeting her gaze for the first time since his arrival. “Sakura,” he said, before dropping his eyes away from her. “It is good to see you well.”

Sakura contained a snort, knowing she looked nothing of the sort. She wasn’t sleeping well these days and no amount of dreamcatchers would help her. No, what kept her awake these nights was nowhere near supernatural in nature. Just ordinary fears and doubts. Not that Zetsu would know, considering the way he kept his gaze averted.

“So what can I do for you today?” Sakura asked. “You didn’t really specify when booking the appointment.”

Zetsu looked around the room, body tense. “Is this a safe place to speak?”

“We can go back to one of the treatment rooms,” Sakura said, standing from her desk. “It is more private than at the front desk.” It was highly unlikely anyone would walk in, especially considering the frosty treatment she was receiving from Pompeii’s citizens, but she wanted Zetsu to feel comfortable.

Zetsu grabbed her wrist, halting her. “No,” he hissed. “Is it safe from prying magic? Is there anyone listening in?”

“I...I don’t know,” Sakura said haltingly, her own gaze roving the clinic. It’d taken a while to clean considering the trash that it received and she hadn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary at that time. “Is that likely?”

Zetsu’s jaw tightened as he nodded. Sakura’s face fell. Of course, why hadn’t she thought of this herself? She was considered a threat by most of Pompeii, questionable at best. She was being naive.

“I apologize,” Zetsu murmured as he stepped closer to her, encircling her in a loose embrace. A few of the fronds of his venus flytrap brushed against her as he did so.

“Zetsu?” Sakura said, hands splaying on his chest, ready to shove him away.

“A moment please.”

Before Sakura had a chance to inquire further, they began sinking into the floor. It was a unique experience, unlike even traveling to the Goblin Market. She felt non-solid, almost liquid in nature. She couldn’t see anything aside from Zetsu’s chest and something about the strange slurping noise around her told her that was for the best.

Finally, it stopped and Sakura stumbled back, catching herself against a tree.
“What was that?” she demanded, chest heaving. She ran her hands over the goosebumps that lined her arms, surprised and relieved to feel the solidity of her being.

“A precaution,” Zetsu replied, striding around their environment with purpose. Gold sigils lit his arms as he muttered ancient phrases beneath his breath, before sigils streamed from his body to the walls of the cave.

Sakura blinked, taking in their surroundings for the first time. From the ceiling of rock above them, Sakura knew they were beneath the ground, though the environment itself didn’t suggest as such. The ground was alive with waist high grasses and fruitful plants, the likes of which Sakura had never seen. There were mushrooms larger than her head growing out of the rock walls and Sakura even noticed various crystal formations lining the garden. Almost everything glowed with an eerie, captivating bioluminescence.

“What are we?” Sakura asked.

“This is my home,” Zetsu said, turning back toward her. In the lighting provided by the plants and crystals, his eyes shone gold.

“There’s no exit,” Sakura said flatly, looking around. She did her best not to show the way her anxiety was spiking, though she wasn’t sure of her success. “How in the world are we breathing?”

“The stone is porous,” Zetsu said, “and I’ve amplified the production of oxygen from these plants. I may be shackled but I am not incompetent.”

“And why have you brought me here?” Sakura asked, ignoring his shackles comment for the moment. There were more pressing concerns.

“We need to speak, away from the prying eyes and ears of Pompeii’s citizens,” Zetsu said. “I’ve seen the way they poke and prod at your life, examining you like an interesting specimen of study. You’re the new commodity in town and they think they’ve a right to you for it.”

Sakura frowned, crossing her arms. “But what is it you need to tell me?” Zetsu twitched and Sakura read the hesitation in his posture. She softened her defensive stance, stepping forward and brushing a hand along his arm. “Whatever it is, I will hear you out.” She smiled bitterly. “It’s the least I can do for a friend.”

“I cannot defy - silence! No! She is kind to us. We will be punished - I don’t care - not merciful!” Zetsu’s face screwed up as he warred with himself. “Who took care of the pruning?” he demanded, his voice almost a roar. And then there was silence.

“Zetsu,” Sakura said softly, looking up at him, a question in her eyes.

He turned and, beneath her scrutiny, relaxed. “I trust you,” he said in earnest, grasping one of her hands. “I know you are not at fault for what is currently happening; it has happened before, long before your arrival.”

Sakura startled. “Really? Then why hasn’t anyone realized?”

“It was before Pompeii, before any of them came here.”

“Well how do I show them? What can I do?” she asked, desperate for answers. Finally, finally, someone was willing to give them to her. It did not escape her notice that the one giving the answers was on the very fringes of Pompeii’s society. “Who do I talk to?”
His face screwed up again and Sakura knew he was fighting himself. “The knights,” he said, voice quiet. “The flower knights.”

Sakura nodded, choosing not to ask how Zetsu knew of them. It was hard enough getting answers to these critical questions. She couldn’t waste her time on the superfluous.

“Thank you Zetsu,” Sakura said, heart warmed. She pressed up onto her toes and brushed a kiss across his cheek. The fronds of the flytrap fluttered as she did so. “It’s reassuring to know that I still have friends.”

As they began to sink into the ground again, Zetsu leaned in close, expression urgent. “Don’t trust the trees, Sakura. They whisper and lie. They drive people to commit madness...to be mad. No place is safe except here and the shrine. Be careful.”

With this parting warning, Zetsu deposited her safely within the clinic, before disappearing once more into her tiled floor.

Sakura scrubbed her hands down her arms, wishing things weren’t so complicated.

“Hello,” Sakura greeted, weaving among the trees into the clearing that marked the home of the knights.

Since Zetsu mentioned that this place was safe, Sakura could now feel some of her anxiety and doubts abate, shed from her skin as easily as water. She wasn’t entirely sure if it was because this location was sacred or because she just felt safer here, but she felt a bit better.

Marigold’s faceplate turned in her direction as it stood from the weathered shrine. It cocked its head to the side slightly, crossing its arms.

“I know, I know,” Sakura said, raising her hands in surrender. “It’s been a while. Things have been...heated in town.”

Daffodil’s hand came down on her shoulder, nearly spooking Sakura out of her skin. She leapt away from it, as if its touch scalded. It immediately stepped away from her, ducking its head as Marigold smacked it.

“No,” Sakura said, laying a hand on each of them. “I’ve just been a bit on edge recently. Please don’t start fighting.”

The sets of armor parted from each other, turning their full attention to Sakura. She wilted slightly beneath their gaze, before bolstering herself. She was here for answers; she had to ask questions to get them.

“Someone told me that the forest has acted up before,” Sakura said as she took a seat by the pond and placed her feet in the water. The pond, Sakura had discovered on an earlier visit, ran warm, more like bath water than anything else. “Is that true?”

The knights looked to each other for a moment before tapping twice, remembering the game they played the last time Sakura plied them for answers.

“Okay,” Sakura said, inhaling deeply. “Was it before Pompeii was founded?”
Two taps.

“Were you present for it?”

Again, another two taps from the daffodil knight.

Sakura bit her lip, thinking back on their previous game of question and answer.

“Are you aware of when it started this time?”

The knights hesitated and Sakura saw that Daffodil was looking at Marigold. They were expressionless, so she couldn’t get an exact read on their hesitation. Finally, two taps came from Marigold, who hadn’t participated up until this point. It kept its flower-filled gaze set in her direction, seemingly trying to prove a point to Daffodil.

“Was it…” Sakura swallowed, warring with herself for a moment. She wasn’t sure she wanted an answer to this one, but she had to ask. “Was it around the time you remember waking up?”

Two taps from Marigold as Daffodil averted its helm.

Sakura breathed deep, as her stomach swooped. She feared she might be sick. This—the knights, the trees, everything—all catalyzed with her. Her arrival woke the slumbering beasts, ones that hadn’t been seen since before Pompeii. And now, whatever the reason for it, innocent people were suffering. Perhaps, perhaps, it was just a case of coincidence, of simple correlation. However, in Sakura’s experience that was rarely, if ever, the case. Somewhere in her gut, Sakura knew the truth.

She was the cause of all of this.

“How did it end last time?” Sakura asked, scrambling to her feet and placing a hand on Marigold in entreaty. “How was the forest stopped?”

Silence met her. The knights looked to each other again for a long moment as Marigold stared Daffodil down. Daffodil threw its hands up and they both returned their gaze her way. As one, they pointed to something beyond Sakura.

Sakura turned, paling as she caught sight of what they were indicating.

The knights pointed to the headstone of the shrine.

The Maiden.

Sakura began her trek back to Pompeii in a daze, unsure how to handle the information she just received. The knights tried comforting her, but there was little that they could do. There was little she could do.

The Maiden sacrificed herself for the sake of Pompeii and its founding; most likely in a fight against this damn forest. And now...well, what was Sakura supposed to do? Was she to throw herself upon the pyre, perishing for the safety of the town? It was a pretty image, neat, heroic martyrdom.

Sakura didn’t think she could do it.

She wasn’t the Maiden, she wasn’t a person that people spoke of with awe and respect in their voices. She wasn’t the person that festivals were held for. She wasn’t the person that people
remembered. She wasn’t the person who saved people; hell, Sakura couldn’t even save herself.

Sakura pressed the palms of her hands hard against her eyelids, fighting off the urge to cry. It wasn’t the time and it wasn’t the place for it. She took a few deep, calming breaths, focusing on the movement of air in and out of her lungs until she was centered once more. Shaking her head to free herself of the residual onslaught of tears, Sakura looked up.

She frowned at what she saw.

Ahead of her, among the thick copse of trees that surrounded her on all sides, was a peach tree. It hung heavy and low with the fruit of its labor; despite the fact that it was out of season for peaches. The peaches were dappled pinks and oranges, tantalizing even at this distance. In fact, Sakura could nearly swear that she smelled them…

Something about the scent snapped her out of her daze and she blinked hard, scrubbing her eyes. Without notice, she’d stumbled closer to the peach tree. Fear pricked the back of her neck as Sakura turned in the opposite direction, heading back toward the clinic.

She continued on for a few moments before, unable to resist temptation, she looked back.

The tree was gone, vanished as if it never existed.

Still, the scent lingered in her nostrils, heady with unfulfilled promises.

Sakura picked up her pace, gladly leaving the forest behind.
Chapter 43

Chapter by Vesperchan

Sakura propped the window open a fraction and inhaled. The weather had turned sharply, and in the morning there was an edge of chill that melted throughout the day. It almost smelled like snow, but it was too soon for snow, based on when the first flakes fell last year.

When it was still dim in the morning Sakura was the most hungry for that chill to corral her back into bed and help justify her staying under the covers. There wasn’t any other reason for her to get up so early, but she felt the drive to rouse and move even when her body was tired.

There was another day empty of appointments. It was nice to have the down time, but too much down time with no place to go and no people to see had started to drive her stir crazy. She didn’t want to overstay her welcome with the few people she was still ‘normal’ with, but that number seemed to grow smaller and smaller each week. Ino was tied up with something that sounded oddly similar to house arrest and work was just busy enough to keep Sai.

Sakura pulled up the ends of her socks and they were fuzzy and long enough to reach her knees under the loose cut of her pj pants. She turned back to bed and climbed in, grabbing her phone as she went.

In her emails there were a few from fellow graduates answering questions she had about their current employment. She was fishing around for a possible in that she could follow in case things really did get bad. Rent and groceries were one thing, but the debt from college wasn’t going to wait and she was close to desperate. Even with Zetsu’s visit last week, she hadn’t had anyone else coming to see her.

She hadn’t talked to either Yamato or Sai about how bad it was getting, she didn’t want to worry either of them or make them feel like they had to help her. There wasn’t anything they could do that wouldn’t be charity. She didn’t want their charity, she wanted to be useful again and to actually work. She was a pretty damn good doctor when she thought about how well she had rolled with the punches in Pompeii, and adapted to the people’s unique needs.

There was work back in New York, not far from the city but far enough for it to not be the city. Sakura was confident she could land a job there if she needed to, but…the thought of it made her heart pinch painfully.

She didn’t want to leave Pompeii, no matter how bad it had gotten. She had thought it was her home, maybe even a forever home. When it had been good it had been great. She didn’t want to believe that it wouldn’t be like that again, even if the trees didn’t stop flowering in autumn when everything else turned colors and fell dead from the branches.

It was impossible to look out and not notice it-that something was wrong with the roots of Pompeii and maybe it was too late to do anything about it. There were even more sick citizens who weren’t getting better and just as many mysterious sightings in her case, of a tree that was so odd ad out of season, it couldn’t not be a sign of something.

If she inhaled deeply enough, she could smell peaches somewhere outside and it reminded her of the pages in mythology texts she had bookmarked. Sakura had considered the trees being magical for all of a hot second before realizing that they had to be magical if they kept disappearing on her in the middle of a field in broad daylight. There were stories about trees with fruit shaped like men that
would make men near immortal when they consumed the fruit, and long lived when simply inhaled.

There were plenty of suspicions and questions and even theories, but not enough answers for anything to make sense.

Sakura dropped her phone onto the bed covers beside her and looked out the window again, noticing the honey light streaming through. It’s later at last and she expects the noise of the day to rear up, but it never does.

Sakura cooks and eats and dresses, but by the time she finishes the world outside is just as quiet and dead as any night. It’s too much of a temptation and Sakura goes to the windows, checking through each one for as far as she can see. Almost all the shops are closed and most of the windows are dark, like plenty of owners hadn’t bothered to come into work before noon.

Watching from the branches there is only one crow left, far less than usual.

‘It’s the perfect time to go out without being hindered,’ she thought.

She finds her boots too quickly and starts to pull them on, followed by a scarf and jacket to protect against the chill.

With her hands in her pockets she starts to stalk off into the trees, passing under them and stepping through their shadows with a vague idea of where she needed to go. Thankfully, no one seemed to be watching.

There were plenty of trees still alive and oddly blooming, but there was still a coating of freshly fallen leaves on the ground to crunch as she stalked by.

A fork in the road appeared sooner than she anticipated and she recognized the way down to the mill where some of the runaways were living. It made her remember how she had promised to check in on them after her first meeting.

It doesn’t take long to step onto the property and it takes even less time to realize that the mill is just as abandoned as the rest of the town. Like Pompeii, it is left with a skeleton crew. Roosting high up in the rafters of the old mill, Sakura finds Kin propped up on a bag of debris reading. There is a blanket over her legs and more raggy pillows scattered around her, and for a moment Sakura fears that it’s the same sickness, but then Kin turns and there is enough color in her skin to chase that fear away.

“You,” she sneered. “What are you doing back?”

“Hey, how is it going? I said I would be back, didn’t I?” Sakura scooted closer and sat down on the ground next to the other girl. “How are you feeling?”

Kin shrugged, turning another page in her book. “Tired and sore and it hurts to breath sometimes, but that’s nothing new, I’ve been like this for years and it’s always worst this time of year when things get cold.”

“I…I have my bag with me if you would like me to give it a listen,” Sakura offered, slipping her napsak off one shoulder.

“Whatever you want. The boys are off spying on that stupid town hall meeting along with everyone else so you’re not going to be interrupted anytime soon.”

“Ah, so that is where they’re all at,” Sakura said, digging into her bag.
She found what she needed and set a small red box aside while reaching for her stethoscope. Kin moved without complaint and breathed deep just like Sakura instructed her to. Unlike all the others, her lungs weren’t filled with mucus as a result of allergies, and it sounded like she was just asthmatic, like Sakura first suspected.

“Take this, it’s an inhaler,” Sakura said, passing the red box to Kin.

Sakura pointed to the instructions and told the girl how to use it and when it would be appropriate to use it, citing various examples and stories that helped illustrate her point. Halfway through Kin looked up and frowned, but didn’t say anything until Sakura was finished speaking.

“I can’t pay you for this, you know. These things are hella expensive without insurance.”

It was Sakura’s turn to shrug. “If I’m going down I’d rather go down in a blaze of glory helping someone. I’d want to help all that I could until I couldn’t help anymore rather than stretch out my stay beyond its usefulness.”

Kin blinked once, and her eyes were dark enough to reflect nearly everything before she glanced back down at the book left open on her lap. “I don’t understand that sort of thinking, but I think you’re probably stupid. Thanks though.”

“I’ve been called worse,” Sakura huffed.

She glanced about and saw several other stacks and piles of books. Most of them had multiple bookmarks in them and looked well read. Most had split or broken spines and some were even colored with highlighter, but they weren’t technical books. The title of one was a color and had faries.

The Green Fairy Book. Another book that was thicker than the rest with twice as many bookmarks had Grimm Brother’s in bold embellished across the spine. It made her think about Kin and her long, long hair, and how she sat in the rafter not unlike a tower.

“You like to read fairy tales?” Sakura asked.

“They’re alright. I guess it beats staying here alone in just the silence. What else is there to do?”

Sakura nodded along, glad to be amicable with someone new. “I guess I understand. I’ve been the opposite of busy these days and reading has been helpful.” she pointed to the book that was still flat with pages exposed and cover hidden. “What are you reading?”

“Myths from Slavic Mothers.” Kin held up the book to show off the cover before dropping it again. “But before that it was another version of Cinderella I think… Egyptian or Persian I’m not sure.”

“I noticed a lot of fairy tales. You don’t think that’s odd in a place like Pompeii where the fairies are free and the good neighbors are the Senju?”

“Stories are cycles, the same epic will be echoed again and again in new eras with new characters in new ways in new times. That’s how it’s always been and that is how it always will be.” her voice was low as her eyes fell shut.

“I’d think with how long some of you guys live, that those same stories would be recognized the second time around, right?”

Kin’s eyes lifted slowly. “We may not be human, but don’t be deceived into thinking we are all as long lived as the Senju. We are not immortal. Only stories will last forever.”
Sakura thought of the tales she had heard growing up and tried to remember where they came from, and how old they were. Beauty and the Beast was thousands of years old, having been first told in a language that was now long dead. But now there were new versions of the tale, much altered from the original text. There were newer, original stories that weren’t quite so old.

When she looked up, Kin was watching her keenly out of the corner of her eye and it prompted Sakura to speak. “What about the new stories?” Sakura asked.

“People look for things that are new and exciting to entertain them, but there’s nothing new, only things that are forgotten. Our brains, even our exalted brains, can’t hold everything in and eventually stuff falls out and we forget about the stories that have yet to echo.”

Sakura thought she would say something more but heard a crash down below as the door was slammed open so hard it slapped the back wall and wailed on its abused hinges. There was a chattering noise from down below before two different bodies staggered up to the loft.

Sakura recognized the two boys from the first time she had visited and waved to them weakly. Zaku saw her first and nearly tripped on his feet before the other boy, Dosu, punched his arm and growled at him to ‘keep it together.’

“You boys get lost on the way back or did you get chased out…again?” Kin growled from her spot on the floor, flipping to another page.

“You think they would have heard us?” Zaku scoffed, running a hand through his hair.

Kin stared at the boy through her thick lashes and Zaku flushed and the growled at her to stop looking at him like that. He looked to Sakura and then folded his arms over his chest with a huff.

“We could hear everything but weren’t as careful about concealing ourselves and were chased off. We didn’t miss much and I doubt they said anything new for how often they beat the same dead horse, said Dosu.

“Same old same old, just like you said it would be, Kin,” Zaku added. “It doesn’t matter that we got caught. They don’t think much of us anyway.”

“You’re an idiot, Zaku,” Kin hissed, glaring at him with eyes that cut deeper than swords. It only made his blush bloom darker across the front of his face.

While the two bickered Dosu looked to Sakura. “Your name came up once or twice,” he added sarcastically.

“Only twice?” Sakura snorted, hating how bitter her laugh sounded in her own ears. “All good things I hope.”

“Oh yeah, only good things, all good things.” His words dissolved into a chittering laugh that might have better belonged to a hyena. “Yeah, they all love you, especially all those shrieking broads who love to mother hen their sons to death. I don’t envy the position you’re in with that guy being the mayor.”

Sakura flinched when she thought of Naruto, his mother, and her husband the mayor. It made a perfect problem for her to deal with. She had heard the Menma had even gotten worse, so as angry as Kushina had been for how Naruto got sick she was probably twice as pissed.

“They said the same thing a hundred times I think. They talked themselves into a never ending circle with the need for proof, the lack of evidence, how little they cared, how much they cared about
preserving integrity and all that, then someone wails about their son and it’s all a big freaking loop. They didn’t say what they were going to do about anything, though. I think another town hall is next week. We’ll be dropping back in for that one too.”

“And that’s next week?” Sakura asked, feeling tired all of a sudden.

“Yeah. I wouldn’t go if I were you. Some of those assholes can’t see reason anymore and more and more of the old geezers want someone to burn to appease the masses, the way politicians always do,” said Zaku.

“They are more interested in laying blame than in finding a cure,” added Dosu.

Kin snorted and returned to her book. “It’s the Senju way.”

Sakura stood and collected her things, claiming it was later than she meant for it to get and promised to come back another time. Kin looked up from her book and the other boys waved when she left, Zaku more so than Dosu.

Sakura could feel their eyes on her as she left, boring into her back. The sensation that they were waiting for her to be out of earshot to talk about her wouldn’t leave her and it nagged her back to the footpath between the trees.

Sakura stared up and saw that the sun was lower, sinking now. It was past noon and it was time she head back. She had been gone long enough and if the boys were back, that meant the town hall was likely over as well. Others would be filtering out into Pompeii and that meant more chances of an unlucky encounter. Sakura decided she wasn’t in the mood for one of those. The fight just wasn’t there.

She was in the thick of the forest, where the shade and shadow is dark when she heard the voices first. More than one, mostly male, and mainly angry. The voices were snapping at each other and growing closer. Sakura couldn’t make out words but the tone was mean enough to make her want to avoid them.

But there was something more than that.

Sakura’s gut pinched. She felt cold in her veins and something flared in her with a primal need to run, run, run, and hide herself. She needed to get off the trail, she needed to make herself unseen and avoid the voices. She didn’t know why, she just knew she had a feeling and she needed to listen to it.

Before she can think twice she runs in the opposite direction. The voices are never far behind and Sakura sprints as quietly as the crunching leaves will let her. She ducks and weaves and stops when she realizes where she is. Sakura turns sharply and heads up the path to the shrine, feeling a sense of safety when she draws near.

The knights are there and turn to see her approach, but the voices are still behind her so Sakura ducked behind the stone structure and pulled herself into a ball. One of the suits approached her slowly and made a gesture. Sakura knew he was asking her if she was okay. The other knight was turned towards the voices growing louder and angrier.

Sakura shook her head ‘no’ and then buried it in her knees, pressing herself into the ground and making herself as small as possible.

Behind her, the two figures made of flower and metal planted themselves like guardians in the way to the shrine. The voices were loud enough to make out a word or two, but before they could come into the clearing, something pushed them away (subtle as magical suggestion), and they were fading.
Sakura waited until they were gone entirely before letting go of her knees and crying.

‘I don’t care what the freak says. We don’t have time for proof.’

‘The forest isn’t safe but the Senju said she was last seen coming and going.’

‘Hurry up. She’s not at the clinic so she has to be out here.’

‘Damn precautions.’

-

When she got back to the clinic it was late and she felt more than just tired. Sakura felt empty.

There was no news and no appointments, only more hate messages on the recordings of calls missed in the morning, so Sakura drags herself into her apartment and starts to change for bed. It’s not even dark out but she doesn’t see the sense in staying her day clothes.

Pulling her shirt up over her head Sakura paused when she noticed something on her body. The seal she had once upon a time been given for the case of emergencies was dead on her skin, cracked and faded in places that made it unusable. It hadn’t been like that recently, and the wear was too great for it to be a gradual thing. Her seal had been cut.

“Fine. Like I needed it anyway,” Sakura seethed, tossing her shirt aside.

She hated how it looked, no longer vibrant like a fresh paint stroke, but decaying like the little faith she had left in the citizens of Pompeii. Like a cancer, they had cut her out.

Sakura pulled on a new nightshirt that smelled like fabric softener when a sound made her pause. It was the bell from downstairs.

‘Shit, I forgot to lock it up front.’ She had only remembered to lock the back when she came in.

She tied her hair back and waited, hoping to hear them move away, but instead someone called out to her. Sakura opened her apartment door and leaned out, listening again as Shizune called up to her.

“Shizune?” Sakura called back. “Is that you?”

“Yeah Sakura, I wanted to talk to you with someone here.” There was a pause. “It’s safe I promise.”

Sakura didn’t feel the pull in her gut that told her when there was danger, so she crossed her arms under her chest and across her stomach and left her apartment behind her. She padded down the stairs and paused at the end, catching sight of who stood alongside her assistant.

“I’d apologize for the state of my dress but I don’t care anymore,” Sakura murmured, looking the taller woman up and down. “What can I do for you Tsunade? Are you here in an official capacity to charge me with something?”

The blond snorted and fit her hands over her hips. “Do I look like an Uchiha police officer to you? Even if I was I wouldn’t be here doing something like that. You know where I just came from?”

Sakura nodded her head before responding. “The Town Hall? I heard there was a meeting.”

“Yeah, and it was all about you, more of less. They said it was to talk about the plague putting so many down, but too many were too eager to point fingers and demand blood.”
“I heard something along those lines,” Sakura admitted. She was bracing herself for what was to come next. Tsunade had never liked her, and this was the perfect reason to justify that displeasure.

“They think you’re either some sort of evil sorceress, or seduction demon that’s here to drain their life source through these trees and sex. That last part was seriously suggested and I don’t want to have to explain it because I don’t understand it any more than the perverts,” Tsunade said.

Sakura swallowed the bitter taste in her mouth and asked what’s been on her mind. “And what do you think?”

“I think you’re an idiot and not nearly brilliant enough to pull something this fantastically clever.” There is something new in the older woman’s eyes. “But I’m probably one of the most bitter people out there when it comes to Pompeii and its political sphere. You’re not the first girl to be burned by old men and superstition and shameful boners, and I doubt you will be the last.”

Sakura felt something drop and then explode in her chest and for the first time in a long time it was a good feeling.

“Wait, you don’t think I’m evil?”

Tsunade snorted. “I think you’re an idiot, it’s not much better.”

Tears spill over and Sakura laughed. “I’d rather be an idiot who’s faithful to her friends than what they’re saying I am. I’m not—I wouldn’t want any of this on them. I’m so sorry and I wish I could help but I don’t know how.”

“Yeah, well I thought it was about time I came by and showed you a thing or two. You’ve been persecuted enough, teasing you any more wouldn’t make me feel any good,” she said with a grin.
Sakura bit her lip. “You aren’t worried about getting in trouble? I know that the Senju are your family.”

Tsunade snorted, looking to Shizune with a fire that simmered over. “Blood of the covenant is thicker than water of the womb.”

“How...human of you,” Sakura said, picking her words cautiously as she rolled the proverb over in her head.

In Pompeii, she knew, family was the deepest bond; the roots that entangled and ensnared an individual’s very soul. People didn’t speak out against family, which left people like Sakura, Kin, Yamato, and Zaku falling through the cracks. Unwanted. Unneeded. No value.

Tsunade’s lips twisted and her flashed with emotion. “Humans, for all their failings, have much to offer us. Their lives are fleeting; the snap of a Polaroid before they are gone, fallen as dead leaves.” Sakura suddenly recognized the emotion for what it was: pain. “They burn brightly, brilliantly during their lifetimes. How can one like us keep from being drawn into their light like moths unto a flame?”

“Tsunade…” Sakura began, knowing there was a story in that agony, there had to be.

Tsunade merely held up a hand, shaking her head. “Unlike the rest of this town, my coven interacts with the world beyond our borders. We embrace the places without magic, learn from them, and the greatest lesson I’ve learned thus far is that there is a little magic in all places. Perhaps not the supernatural kind that my brethren are so accustomed to, but a different sort. An ordinary sort.”

Sakura nodded, listening closely as Tsunade’s cadence took on that of a teacher as Shizune watched them both with a pleased expression. It was nice to discuss something other than the doom and gloom of Pompeii’s situation.

“You’ve a magic of your own,” Tsunade said. “It isn’t loud certainly, subtle in comparison to the cacophony that is Pompeii.” Her gaze went distant and remote and, for a moment, Sakura felt like Tsunade saw right through her. Her neck pricked uncomfortably as something washed over her. “It’s a natural form of magic; steady and slow. Nothing like the violence of the forest.” She sneered. “If those fools at town hall would just listen--” She cut herself off, shaking her head. “In any case, there is no doubt in my mind that, though you are a fool, you are not cruel.”

Sakura smiled, heart lightening. “If that’s the case—if you know definitively that it isn’t me—can’t we tell the others?” Her stomach sunk as both Tsunade and Shizune shook their heads. “What? What’s wrong?”

“They won’t believe it,” Shizune said. “They’re willfully blind.”

“I’m an outsider, despite my familial ties to the Senju,” Tsunade said. “Besides, there’s quite a bit of circumstantial evidence stacked against you; the Uchiha brat has fallen ill.”

“Sasuke?” Sakura asked, heart heavy. Even though they’d parted ways with bitter words, she still cared. “How is he?”

“He’s doing poorly,” Tsunade said, blunt as always. “Worse even than the Uzumaki twins.
Tobirama is quite ill as well and his brother is baying for your blood. The ones who are the worst off--Sasuke, Itachi, Menma, Tobirama--have had public disagreements or altercations with you. People who have had private disagreements with you, such as myself, have been left untouched. It’s heavy-handed and crude, but someone is setting you up.”

“You think someone is framing me?” Sakura asked, aghast. “What would they have to gain? I had little status in the town even prior to the onset of the illness.”

Shizune and Tsunade exchanged unreadable looks. “Perhaps it has to do with your position?” Shizune ventured. “The previous doctor...well, you heard of him from other residents. He was cruel and capricious, treating patients inhumanely and experimenting on them without consent.”

“Kabuto Yakushi,” Tsunade muttered. “He was the star pupil of Orochimaru a few centuries ago. Pompeii ran him off, but he wasn’t killed.”

“You think he’s responsible for the trees?” Sakura asked.

“It would make sense,” Shizune said, warming to the topic. “Tsunade wasn’t in Pompeii at all during Kabuto’s residency, but I was. He is an expert in creating toxins of all sorts. He specialized in airborne ones, but I saw him use water as a catalyst at least once…”

“He was responsible for the pollution of Lake Icarus,” Sakura said, realization striking like lightning. “He hurt so many people...but what did he have to gain from the lake?”

“A practice run,” Shizune said, eyes hard and cold.

Sakura shivered.

“Enough,” Tsunade said, clapping her hands to dispel the silence that had overtaken them. “There is naught to do with such speculation. I am a woman of action and I believe I promised you some assistance.” Sakura nodded hesitantly. “Come,” Tsunade said, stepping past her further into the clinic. Sakura exchanged a commiserating look with Shizune at the way Tsunade swept through the clinic, smiling despite herself. She followed Tsunade, obeying as she patted the examination table. “Let me take a look at that seal on your stomach.”

Sakura tensed, hands splaying to cover the dead seal in an almost protective gesture. “Why?”

“According to Shizune, it was drawn upon you by Minato,” Tsunade said with a surprising wealth of patience. “All seals are imbued with some of the sealer’s energy. Even in a dead seal, Minato can still track you.”

“Really?” Sakura asked, frowning down at her stomach. “I thought only the sealer could remove it.”

“I’m a Senju and a witch besides,” Tsunade said, pride curving her mouth into a grin. “Namikaze is no match for my skill.”

With a brief glance at Shizune who nodded her encouragement, Sakura lifted her shirt, leaning back against the table. The ruined seal stood out starkly against her skin, an unspoken symbol of her current status within Pompeii.

Tsunade brushed her knuckles over it, shaking her head as she tsked. “This has Namikaze’s signature all over it: clumsy and blunt, no elegance.” Her eyes shifted from honeyed brown to a brilliant gold as Sakura’s stomach began to tingle. “He’s certainly been keeping tabs on you, though it is faint. He can only tell if you are in or out of Pompeii. If Mito or Kushina completed the seal, they would’ve been able to truly track you.” Sakura’s skin warmed beneath Tsunade’s fingertips and she
resisted the urge to squirm. “A few minutes more and there will be nothing left.”

Sakura watched silently as the black lines of the seal began to curl away at the edges, collapsing in on itself around her bellybutton before winking out of existence. “It’s gone?”

“Minato will be most displeased,” Tsunade said, a satisfied grin upon her face.

Sakura sighed, putting her weight onto her elbows. “Undoubtedly this will be considered a part of that ‘circumstantial evidence’ of theirs.”

Tsunade laughed, slapping Sakura’s knee as she hopped to her feet. “Oh, to be sure! I’ve no doubt they’ll be calling another town meeting soon enough.”

“Just another reason for them to hate me.” Sakura frowned as she straightened her clothes.

“You don’t have to stay here,” Shizune said softly, after casting her mentor a dark look. She smiled, warmth and encouragement in her eyes as Sakura looked up, startled. “There are other places to call home. More welcoming ones, certainly.”

“Moving requires money and a stable, paying job,” Sakura said, bustling around to tidy up the examination room. She kept her eyes down, embarrassed to speak about her finances. “Of which I have neither in abundance.”

“That can be changed,” Tsunade said, clearing her throat. “You don’t work as a physician for a number of centuries without making some connections. I could...put out some feelers, call some friends and see if there are any jobs on the market.”

“If not, we will make some,” Shizune said, chin jutted and stubborn.

Sakura bit her lip again, gaze wavering between the two women. Something hot prickled her throat as she nodded. “Yeah, that’d be great.”

“Sakura.”

Sakura tensed, clutching her bag and journal closer before looking up at the interloper. Sasori’s cool gaze met her own, an elegant brow arching at her defensive position. She’d brought the bag up between them almost as a shield.

Sakura coughed, scooting to the side of the bench so he could join her. She wasn’t used to people coming out this way, being as it was between the town proper and the logging front. This had once been a garden, but it’d long been abandoned and overrun with a bounty of dandelions. It was nice and it was peaceful, away from the prying eyes of the town. Except, apparently, it was not.

“How’d you find me?” Sakura resisted the urge to wince at her accusatory tone.

Still, Sasori sat down with an unearthly grace, head lolling back slightly as he regarded her. “Wasn’t too hard to do,” he replied, choosing not to let her know that he’d tracked her a few times as she made her way through the forest. He was unaffected by the presence in the forest and he needed to collect wood for his art. If he happened to trace along Sakura’s path to the abandoned logging town, well, that was his business. “You’ve been avoiding town recently.”

Sakura chuffed, a bitter, crackling sound. It hurt something deep within Sasori to hear it. She was sallow, gaunt. The stress of the town’s suspicions upon her was clearly leaving its mark in the dark rings beneath her eyes. “I wonder why,” she murmured, hands clenched white around her phone
Sasori swallowed, though it was a gesture that was merely symbolic; a last vestige of his humanity. “I am sorry for how you’ve been treated,” he said softly.

“As am I,” Sakura said, finally turning her gaze to him. Her expression was just as flat as his. “What are you doing here, Sasori?”

Sasori stayed quiet. Why was he here? Something had been gnawing at his gut for weeks, months even. Ever since that fateful decision to stay his hand with the genesis tree…

Guilt.

It festered within him, unfamiliar and heavy within his gut. He hated it, the way it gouged him out and left him empty. Well…emptier than usual.

“What do you want, Sasori?” Sakura demanded, the bite of her voice drawing Sasori out of his reverie.

“I… I want to apologize,” he said.

“For what?” Sakura asked. “You haven’t been involved in this… upheaval.”

“The upper echelon of Pompeii is blind,” Sasori scoffed. “You aren’t connected to what’s happening in the forest. I, on the other hand, think that I might be involved.”

Sakura stiffened, getting to her feet. “You did this?”

“Not this exactly,” he said. Sasori caught her hand, not caging her precisely, but trying to keep her from running. “I do, however, think I may have catalyzed this event.”

“How?” she asked as she pulled her hand away from him. “Why?”

“It wasn’t purposeful,” Sasori snapped, tetchy at the way she shied away from him. “I think that this all may have started with the genesis tree.”

“The genesis tree?” Sakura said. “That was months ago! What the hell does it have to do with the recent events?”

“I didn’t exactly cut down the genesis tree,” Sasori revealed. “I may have used another in its place.”

Sakura blanched. “Why on earth would you do that? The genesis tree is important. You were the one who told me that!”

“…” What could he say? The genesis tree had reminded him of her. It was a paltry excuse in the face of her exhaustion and frustration. “The significance of the genesis tree was lore; a myth told throughout Pompeii to celebrate the Senju legacy.” His lips twisted. “Who truly believes that a tree can embody the Maiden and her sacrifice?”

“Well look what’s happened since then,” Sakura said, gesturing around her to the trees. “Obviously there’s some truth in the protection offered by the genesis tree!”

“I know that now,” Sasori replied.

Sakura scowled at him, shaking her head. “Have you told anyone else about this?”

case.
“No, not yet.”

“You should,” she said. “Tell the Senju or the Uzumaki or someone. There’s very little I can do with this information.” She moved to go, jaw clenched. “You should attend the town halls, speak up there.”

“Sakura, I’m...I’m sorry,” Sasori said.

Sakura turned back to him, eyes flinty. “Sorry isn’t enough, Sasori, not for this.”

It remained unspoken but understood between them that the decision he made those many months ago might have completely unmade Sakura’s life in Pompeii.

Sasori watched her go, something burning at his eyes. It was an unknown sensation and Sasori brought a hand up to his eyes. His face was dry but he knew that, had he his old body, tears would streak his face. As it was, Sasori stared after Sakura, long after she was gone, futilely cursing the clearness of his vision.

Now, more than ever, Sasori knew the differences between him and the others.

Was this...regret?

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“What business do you have with the Sound degenerates?”

“Good to see you too, Yagura,” Sakura said drily, closing her journal. She hadn’t been getting very far on the pros and cons list in any case. She ignored the way his eyes drifted over the movement with interest. “You seem well. How may I assist you today?”

Yagura flushed a bit beneath Sakura’s steady, unwavering attention. “I’ve received information that you’ve been visiting the old logging grounds. What business do you have with the transients who reside there?”

“What business do you have asking me such questions? Or tailing me as you’ve apparently been doing,” Sakura snapped, disliking the arrogance with which he strode into her clinic. She may be nearly run out of town, but this was still her territory. “What do you want?”

Yagura scrutinized her for a moment, before sauntering forward and taking a seat in front of her. “You’ve changed.”

“I don’t know if I’d say that,” Sakura replied, leaning back and examining him in turn. “I’ve been under constant speculation and allegations by this town and its people for the past few weeks. What I am is tired. And angry. And perhaps even a bit fed up with people coming into my clinic and making demands and accusations of me. So yes, Yagura, perhaps I am, in fact, a bit different from the woman I was when you last saw me. It’s been months since we’ve last interacted in a meaningful way.”

Yagura bit his tongue. Sakura’s anger didn’t burn hot and bright like his own or those of his colleagues; instead it ran cool and steady, the rage of a waterfall rather than a flame. She was distant, timeless in an inexplicable way.

In this moment, Yagura felt utterly inadequate and foolish in the face of Sakura’s composure.
“I...apologize,” Yagura said, voice soft, his earlier irritation extinguished. “I have heard of the goings on in town but I did not know they’d reached this extent.”

“What has Kiri been up to recently?” Sakura asked, frowning. “I haven’t seen anyone from your side of town in quite some time.”

“We’ve had some dealings out of town,” Yagura replied, crossing his arms. “Been working with some Kappa to clean up the pollution of Lake Icarus which has been a hell of a mess. Between the magic necessary and the legal tape we’ve run into with jurisdiction issues…” He sighed, shaking his head. “It’s no matter.”

“And no one has fallen ill?” Sakura asked, curious despite herself. “No one’s fallen victim to the forest?”

“No,” Yagura said. “The only sickness we have has sprung up from interacting with the polluted water of the lake.”

“Strange,” Sakura murmured. Something niggled at her. “About the lake...I believe the pollution may have been caused by Kabuto.”

“Kabuto,” Yagura said, eyes flashing. “Thank you for the tip. I’ll look into it.” Sakura shivered. “As for the lack of sickness, we’re a hardy folk,” Yagura said, a proud tilt to his chin. “Not weak and lily-livered like the Senju and Uzumaki in town.”

Sakura nodded absently, her frown thoughtful. An entire branch of Pompeii was unaffected by the encroaching sickness of the forest. There was something important in that fact, though Sakura was not sure what it was.

“Have you told the others?” Sakura asked. “Revealed this information at the town hall meetings?”

“Why would we attend those meetings? They’re set up to stroke the egos of the Uzumaki and Senju. I refuse to pander to them.”

“Would you consider it?” Sakura asked, hating the near begging quality to her voice. “Please? I think it might help.”

Yagura frowned at her. “Is it truly so bad as that?”

“It certainly isn’t ideal,” Sakura replied, stung but resigned to his callousness. She should have known better than to expect anything different. “If things continue as they are...I don’t believe I’ll be able to call Pompeii my home. Not any longer.”

Yagura scowled, looking down at his fisted hands. He wasn’t used to the buzzing, nagging feeling within his gut, urging him to do something, anything, to keep her near. He didn’t understand it, but Yagura was disinclined to ignore his wants. “I will see what I can do,” he said finally. Sakura’s smile in return was more than payment enough. “Be careful, if you do choose to carry on with the Sound transients.”

“Why?”

“They’ve a chip on their shoulders,” Yagura replied, standing and draping his coat across his arm. “Whether or not it is deserved is a question for debate another day. You know as well as I do that the people of Pompeii hold grudges longer and deeper than the very foundations of this country. Do what you can to avoid being caught up in it.”
Sakura sighed, her breath crystallizing in the chilly air as she opened the door for Yagura. “I’m afraid there’s no avoiding it now.” She shivered and ran her hands over her arms. “They need help and I will gladly give it.”

Yagura stepped close, cupping her face in a warm hand. His eyes were sad as he said, “Do not give more of yourself than you have to offer. You’ll burn yourself out far too quickly like that.”

With that, he bundled into his car, leaving Sakura feeling cold and bereft.

She had the sinking suspicion that it was far too late to take heed of his advice. “At least I’ll burn out in a blaze,” she said to herself in a paltry attempt at comfort, before moving back into the clinic.

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“Where are you going?”

Sakura turned to Yamato and Sai. They were all in the living room, watching some of Sakura’s favorite Christmas movies as they began to wind down for the evening. All were dressed in their coziest of pajamas, Sakura even donning her poker playing dog robe over hers. Currently, The Nutcracker Prince was on.

“To the kitchen?” Sakura said, her answer coming out as a question in response to Yamato’s nearly angry tone. “I was going to check on the brownies.”

“Not that,” Yamato said, body positioned like he was about to pounce. “You’ve been looking at other jobs, other cities in other states.”

“I saw the pros and cons list you’ve been making,” Sai added, jaw tight with anxiety. “You’re leaving.”

Sakura glanced between the two of them, taking in their frustration and fear. She slumped across the couch across from them. “It is something I’ve been considering,” she admitted.

“Why?” Sai asked.

“The situation here is getting more tense by the day. The clinic has been attacked and, soon I’m afraid, I believe I will be as well.”

“Let them try,” Yamato growled, a rage in his eyes that startled Sakura.

“No,” Sakura said. “I’d rather they did not. There’s little that I can do about the situation. Pompeii is a magically founded and magically run town.” She ran a hand through her hair. “I’ve looked into it. The jurisdictions that apply to most other places don’t carry over here. What human government will stand before a supernatural population and attempt to curtail them? Many have tried, and history remembers them as some of the greatest tragedies.

“If something happens to me, the punishment, if any, will be but a slap on the wrist. And, with so many people falling ill, I fear that the extreme solution, eliminating the perceived threat, becomes more and more attractive.” She curled in on herself, tucking her hands into her flannel robe. “I don’t want to die.”

Two sets of arms were thrown around her. The movements were a bit awkward, certainly hesitant, but they were warm.
Sakura looked up into Sai and Yamato’s resolute faces.

“We won’t let you die,” Sai said.

“We’ll fight for you,” Yamato said. “We’re family.”

Sakura nodded, throat a bit too tight to respond. Instead she relaxed into their embrace, enjoying the simple sensation of being held. They huddled together in silence, basking in each other’s presence.

“If you leave, we’re going with you,” Sai said abruptly.

*That* caught Sakura’s attention. “What about your jobs?” Sakura scrambled to sit upright. “Pompeii has been your home for centuries. I can’t be your reason for leaving that all behind.”

“There isn’t much to leave,” Yamato said, voice warm but firm. “Nothing ties me to Pompeii aside from the two of you.”

“If you leave, we’ll follow,” Sai said in that matter of fact tone of his, tucking his cold nose against the back of Sakura’s neck. “Pompeii is just a place. You are our home.”
She had an invitation for an interview at the end of the week, and the clinic was only a two hour drive away. Shizune was lending her a car and Sakura had spoken to the boys about it. Neither liked the sound of it, but they had to admit that a two hour commute was better than moving out of Pompeii where they were most comfortable moving around and being themselves.

Neither Sai nor Yamato had an overwhelming love for Pompeii, but as much as they denied it, Sakura knew that Pompeii was where they felt the most on top of things. If they left the place where Tengu and Kitsune could walk openly through the streets and not fear human persecution it would mean learning to live in hiding. She didn’t want them to have to go through that, so she had been purposeful in searching for places that would take her close to the limits of Pompeii’s boundaries.

She needed a source of income. She couldn’t get by much further without one and it was killing her inside to have to forgo the gift giving season for financial reasons. It was so stupid to admit, but with everything piled on top of each other, the spare cash for presents wasn’t there and she was reduced to old fashioned, silly coupon books and cookies.

God she was nearly out of flour too. Soon she’d be stuck with ramen again. What sort of doctor lived off ramen out of med school?

Sakura hated how ashamed she felt.

She loved Sai and Yamato and wanted to bless them, wanted to treat them right and show them as much kindness as they had shown her.

With a frustrated grunt Sakura pulled out a box of old, mostly forgotten, art supplies that were mostly dried up and old. She couldn’t make art like Sai could, but she did have one or two hidden talents she could put to use if she remembered how to utilize them.

Sakura prepped a piece of parchment and tested out the calligraphy pen on some scratch journal paper. She practiced the words a few times, unsatisfied with the results until the fifth page. She remembered the feel of the flowing script and wrote out her words again and again until she was positive she had it down.

Your arms like branches encircle me
And I am made well in the shade of your love

The first poem was finished without issue, and Sakura was worried her good luck wouldn’t hold for the second poem, but karma must not have been a bitch just then because the second poem came out just as she had hoped it would.

Sakura blew on the ink until the gloss was gone and dried. She then hid the poems in the pages of a book and set that book aside under her table. The noon day sun was up and she felt like she had finally done something productive in the morning. She never got patients anymore, but at least she had accomplished something.

She would never think anyone silly for complaining about lack of work again. Her mind was ready to go numb from the disuse. If she didn’t have the castaways to help out she didn’t know how she’d manage to hold onto her sanity.
Kin and the others were still a little weary of her, especially after hearing about the town hall concerns, but the more the Senju vilified Sakura, the more Kin and the others seemed to welcome her. They might suspect her to be more dangerous than appearances suggest, but they didn’t hate her or think her the great evil the rest of Pompeii thought her to be.

“The Senju are all liars anyway. You have to look at where they are in the hierarchy and ask yourself how they’ve managed to maintain that much power for so long. No one at the top is there without a little blood on their hands or sin in their shadow,” Dosu had scoffed one day when Sakura came to bring them books and magazines.

“The world needs villains in order to make heroes and the Senju have always been heroes, even when there was no evil,” added Kin.

Sakura remembered being nervous, licking her lips, and then voicing her thoughts to the group. “What do you think I am?”

Kin had stared up over the edge of the magazine that was seven months old and a little battered around the edges. Her stare was half lidded and lacking the energy to be piercing. “You’re neither. You’re just a person. Don’t be so full of yourself.”

Sakura couldn’t help but like Kin for her attitude.

She had more magazines and some books she could take down to them. It was better than hanging out in her house for another day, waiting for the hours to pass before Sai came home from work and Yamato came home from the errands Sakura could no longer safely go out and complete. (The grocery store run was a suicide mission in her mind.)

Sakura dressed for the cold, noting that last year she needed almost twice as many layers. Maybe it was global warming or something else, but Pompeii was unusually warm in ways even she noticed.

She left out the back and had her hands stuffed deep in her pockets when she heard the shouting two blocks over. Like other times, the streets were mostly empty, but there wasn’t supposed to be a town hall meeting…at least…not one that she knew of. Tsunade had been kind enough to keep her up to date on such political maneuverings so far.

Sakura ducked into the shadows and pressed herself close to the side of a building. The voices sounded stationary, circling around a central point. They were loud and angry and the sort of voices Sakura wanted to avoid. Sai wasn’t anywhere nearby and Yamato…she wasn’t sure. If she left now there was a chance she’d be seen. Had she already been seen? They were close enough to hear, maybe they had heard her already.

She smelled something strong and nearly gagged as the accelerent burned with a roaring woosh. There were a few cheers and then some more angry screaming. Sakura hated the part of her that couldn’t help but be curious.

Curiosity killed the cat-

Sakura edged around the corner of the building to see the back of the crowd lighting a stray man, a literal man made out of straw, on fire. Inside the burning man there were branches, flowering branches with the blossoms dripping with flame. The straw wasn’t stray, but bleached wood. Around the head of the effigy was a grown of blossoms trailing in pink layers.

At the front of the circle Shikamaru and Choji stood there, glaring at the flames. Sakura recognized Kankuro and Temari, remembering how Gaara had fallen sick not too long ago. Shino was there too,
hanging close to the back with the collar of his hood popped. There were others she didn’t recognize except by their faces from moments in passing, but the ones she did remember hurt so much worse.

“Look at it, it’s not even burning right. The wood ain’t natural,” someone screamed before throwing another bottle at the burning body. “Bitch, burn!”

-But satisfaction brought it back.

Behind the effigy on the wall in graffiti streaks were the words she had been seeing all around the clinic on the outside walls in different strokes. ‘Burn the disease’ ‘Purge the outsider’ ‘drive out the sickness’ ‘Plague bitch.’

“What are they doing still talking about it? Pretty soon there won’t be anyone left. My old man’s out of it now.”

“My parents too. The neighbors said their kid was sick with fever this week too. It’s everywhere.”

“It’s too many places for them to be doing nothing about it,” Kankuro bit, voice deep and angry. It was then she remembered that TenTen had also fallen ill. Hadn’t Kankuro fancied her?

Shikamaru lifted something to his lips and the lit the end up, smoking a thin white roll of tobacco. “Naruto isn’t even waking up anymore. Pretty soon that will be everyone who got touched by it.”

“And Ino…”

Choji’s words were harder to hear, but they made her heart fall like a lead weight in her chest. She nearly lost her footing as the shock and horror washed over her. Ino? She hadn’t heard about Ino. She hadn’t known….

“I’m not going to listen to them any longer. They know it just like we know it, so I’m going to do something about it!” One of the citizens Sakura couldn’t name spoke up. He pointed to the burning body and snarled. “She’ll burn better than these cursed trees.”

Too many more voices roared in agreement. Kankuro looked ready to march along with them when only a year ago he had looked so happy just to see her visiting Gaara. Even Temari looked ready to draw blood for the sake of her youngest brother.

Someone threw something at the burning body and Sakura saw it was a cinder block. It sailed through the air and landed on the twigs, tearing it down from the post into a pile on the ground at a young woman’s feet. She screeched and stomped at it and the sound of cracking branches sounded louder as her efforts were aided by another pair of stomping shoes.

The twigs were in pieces but still smoldering as the group started to turn, rallying behind a cry that sounded familiar in a way she didn’t want to know.

Sakura braced against the wall, safe in the shadows, watching the group move like the mob she knew them to be. A mob hungry for her blood.

They didn’t get far before a gust shrieked through the air and shoved the first few bodies up and over the heads of those behind them. There was tumbling and flailing limbs before the front row was upright and looking at the body of the man responsible.

“You!” Temari hissed, reaching for her brother. She grabbed for Kankuro and helped him up. “What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be gone from Pompeii.”
Pein angled his chin up so that he was staring down at the clustered bodies in front of him like they were nothing more than dirt at the tip of his shoe. His eyes rippled with purple light and the air hummed with his energy. He looked regal in a double breasted pea coat the color of coal, cut to flatter his masculine figure.

“You are unsightly. Disperse.” His words were curt and dismissive just like his tone.

“What the hell. He’s in on it with the bitch, that’s why he’s never here, staying out of her way while she cleans us out,” someone hissed. The woman then turned to Pein, shouting out the rest of what she had to say. “You’ve always been a villain, looking down on us. You’re no better than any of us and we all know it. Get out of our way.”

Pein made a dismissive sound with his teeth and his lips before closing his eyes and then looking away, completely disinterested with the woman’s accusations.

“Bothersome.”

The woman’s eyes flashes and she reached out with her hand, growing scaly with the beginnings of her transformation before a jagged bolt of white lightning ran through her palm and then struck the ground in front of Kankuro and his sister. They both jumped back as the woman dropped to the ground in a cry of pain, holding her smoking hand that was burned too bad to bleed. Another vein of lightning shot out and scarred the ground in front of the group.

“You can’t do that, the Senju-”

“Are running around with their heads up their asses, I know dear,” Pein drawled lazily. “And the Uchiha and their shiny gold badges are nowhere to be seen. Ask me if I give a damn, darling.”

He looked up from his fingernails as if waiting for an answer but smirked when there was only tense silence from the subdued mob.

“You’re a villain,” Choji challenged.

The roll of his shoulders was less of a shrug and more an act of nature. He stared at the sky when he spoke. “There are worse things to be.”

“Are you in on it with her, then?” Shikamaru asked, stepping in front of his more agitated friend. He pushed Choji back and held him with the palm of his hand, a gesture that was more meaningful than purposeful. “You’ve never claimed to be a good person, Pein, but people tend to forget that about you after years of your quiet. I may not be my father but I know almost as much as him.”

“And yet you continue to play the fool. For a Nara you’re awfully stupid. I never thought I would see one in a mob. I’d rather be a villain than an idiot.”

“And I’d rather not let my emotions cloud my judgments when making decisions, because that’s where I think too many people have gone wrong. It’s gotten to you at least. Or is it something else? You want Pompeii for yourself and she’s the easiest way to get it?”

Pein closed his eyes and sighed, heaving out a breath that escaped his lips in a puff of steam. When he opened his eyes again there was lightning crackling behind his lashes. He was a barely contained storm in human form.

“You bore me boy. You’re not your father. Go home and put this foolishness behind you before I am agitated further.” Pein eyed the still smoking hand of the Naga woman to make his point clear.
“I don’t like agreeing with him, but I don’t think I can help it this time,” a new voice interjected.

Sakura almost came out of her shadows to see the new form join the fray, but didn’t need to. She knew that voice far too well to ever doubt it. A second later Yamato stepped up to stand beside Pein who was looking sideways at the new arrival with a slight curl to his lip.

A few bodies in the back started to break away, backing up and away. Pein was a powerhouse on his own that could likely wipe them out without the help, but there were too many stories and years of bad blood for most other residents to stand Yamato’s presence. There were too many stories of what he did in the dark.

Sakura watched as more and more figures began to break away, grumbling to themselves and each other about the unfair circumstances. Someone bemoaned the fact that the Uchiha were all on holed up in the mountains and the Senju drawn back into their compounds. No one was managing the streets.

“You were entirely unnecessary,” Pein huffed. “I was doing just fine on my own.”

“I don’t doubt that,” said Yamato. “But it was less a desire to help you and more a need to stick up for my family when I see them threatened. I’m not about to stand back and let people talk about Sakura like that.”

Pein sneered, a new sort of emotional anger coming into the details of his expression. He had been cool with the mob, mocking them nonchalantly with half a heart, but when he looked at Yamato he looked a little more expressive than before.

“You sound very high and mighty for the cast off bitch. I want to burn that look off your face.”

Yamato glared back with a smile sharp enough to cut yourself on. “You’re no angel either. Where do you think you get off talking down to them when you doubted her yourself.”

“Ah, I see she tells you these things. You two must be…close.”

“Huh, something like that.” Yamato had a bag on each wrist, but he still managed to stuff his hands into his pockets.

There was a lick of light darting across the ground, uncontrolled and raw. Yamato didn’t flinch as it burned the earth between them.

“I didn’t care if it was her. I didn’t care one way or the other if she was a saint or a devil. It didn’t matter to me and yet you’re the one she takes in. Revolting filth. You don’t deserve it.”

Yamato’s smile slipped as a sound passed his lips. A soft chuckle sounded like how salt felt on an open wound and another lick of lightning danced behind Pein. There was the sound of thunder somewhere.

“It’s not about deserving, shit face. It never is with her.”

Yamato started to turn, taking a step away, and then another when Pein called out again.

“Then why is it you?”

Yamato took another step and then stopped, but didn’t turn around. He glanced off to the side and saw the still smoldering remains of the burning effigy. He glared at the flowers on fire.
“She did tell me about it, told me about you, about how you doubted her. I remember thinking something similar, about how if it was her I wouldn’t mind. If she wanted to raze Pompeii to the ground I would be her right hand in doing it, but that’s not her. I know in her heart that this is nothing but grief to her. She’s watching her friends suffer or hate her everyday and I wish there was something more I could do. This isn’t her.”

“You wouldn’t have been the only one who would have stood with her if this was her doing. You’re not that special.”

Yamato looked back over his shoulder. “But I believed in her first and I’m the one that gets to make dinner for her tonight. You can keep your dreams if you think it’ll help, but I don’t need to.”

The air around Pein clapped with a roll of angry thunder as another bolt of blue lightning burned the ground in front of Yamato, but the man was already gone. Pein snarled at the empty road, still smoldering from where his lightning had struck. His hands were fists at his side, curled so tightly the knuckles stood out white.

He turned and started to step away when he faltered. Pein looked to where the last of the burning figure still smoldered. He approached it and then kicked some dirt over the flames before sighing. The sight of what was left over wasn’t anything worth a double take.

Pein stretched out his hand and water fell from his fingertips like a miniature mist shower. The water fell over the flames and doused them right away. Pein reached into the pile and pulled out a twig with a pink bud on the end. He worked it between his fingers and the bud peeled open for him.

Sakura blinked and he was gone.

To: Sai
Love: Sakura

You have taken the dull colors of my existence and made them vibrant
Where once the ash and gray was my horizon,
You bleed sunsets in my heart and stop up my veins with the blues of a thousand skies
I will forever be better for having known you
And forever changed for having loved you
Chapter 46

Chapter by jaylene

Sakura traced along the salt circle with her feet, slowly making her way around the clinic and apartment. Sai and Yamato were her silent shadows, but she could sense their nervous energy. The lines of salt were no thinner than an inch at any given point and in the areas behind the building the design swirled outward into what appeared to be runes. Sakura sneezed, rubbing her nose at the sheer force of the magic within the salt.

It completely encircled her property.

“What do you think?” Yamato asked, scrubbing a hand through the coarse hairs at the back of his neck.

“It’s quite strong,” Sakura said, bending down to examine a rune that appeared to be an inverted ‘g.’ “How much energy did the two of you have to put into it?”

“Shizune assisted,” Sai said. “She’s been shoring up power within artifacts for decades.”

When Sakura still looked concerned, Yamato took her hand in his and patted it. “Sai and I will be running low for a few days, but our apartment and yours are impenetrable.”

“And salt alone will do this?” Sakura asked, thinking back to the memorable baking experience where Ami mistook salt for sugar when baking a chocolate chip cookie pie. Perhaps Ami was trying to ward their apartment.

“It’s more than salt,” Sai said, staring at the different designs. “It’s imbued with our magics and our intent. It’s able to assess the motives of those who touch its borders and keep them from crossing if they hold hostile intentions.”

“You—we’ll be safe,” Yamato said.

Sakura nodded, a slow smile overtaking her face. “Well, alright then. Thank you both for your kindness and generosity. I guess we can begin your restoration period with a movie marathon. How do you feel about Studio Ghibli films?”

Yamato and Sai glanced at each other before shrugging.

“Oh are you two in for a treat,” Sakura said, herding them toward the front door.

“Sakura?”

The trio whirled and Sakura grinned.

“Kakuzu! It’s been awhile!”

“Has it?” Kakuzu stepped across the salt, shuddering slightly. He looked between Sai and Yamato’s thunderous scowls. “Which of you included the sting in the protection spell?”

Sakura glanced between the men, frowning at Yamato and Sai. She wasn’t sure if they were being overzealous or, considering the attitude of the town, properly cautious. Still, as she met Kakuzu’s slightly confused gaze, Sakura knew that he didn’t mean her any harm. Besides, he’d crossed the barrier of salt just fine.
“It’ll be fine,” Sakura said, looking meaningfully at Yamato and Sai. “Go ahead and get My Neighbor Totoro queued up; I’ll be up shortly.”

Sai was the first to turn away, clapping a hard hand on Yamato’s shoulder and pulling the glaring man away.

“I hadn’t realized they moved in,” Kakuzu said, smiling slightly as he looked at Sakura. “A lot has changed these past few days, huh?”

Sakura frowned slightly, letting Kakuzu into the clinic. “Kakuzu, it’s been a year since I last saw you.”

Kakuzu’s eyes went wide and he stumbled as he crossed the threshold. Sakura caught his arm, helping to take a seat. He sat down heavily, placing his head in his hands.

“Are you alright?” Sakura asked, rubbing a hand over his.

“When am I?” Kakuzu asked.

“Well, the last time I saw you was at the Uzumaki party closing out the old year. It’s been over a year since then. We’ve just ushered in a new year. The Uzumaki I’m sure completed the same rituals as last year but without all the fanfare; it was a private affair.”

“Private?” Kakuzu asked. “The winter solstice festival has been opened to the public for centuries. There’s no way that the Uzumaki of all clans would suddenly close it off.”

Sakura grimaced. “Well, a lot has changed in the year since your disappearance.”

In halting starts and stops, Sakura told him of current climate in Pompeii, the mysterious illness, and the turn of its citizens upon her. Kakuzu stayed silent throughout, but kept his hand over hers, squeezing at the specific intervals wherein Sakura discussed Pompeii’s attitude toward her.

“A lot has happened while I’ve been away,” Kakuzu said when Sakura fell silent. “More than anything that’s happened in the past few decades.”

“Where were you?” Sakura asked. “Do you normally disappear for months on end like that?”

Kakuzu shook his head, eyes curving up into a smile above his mask. “No, it isn’t normal. Usually I’m better able to keep track of the passage of time. I was in the fifty-second dimension which tends to cause one’s mind to wander far beyond time and space but…” He fell silent, brows knitting together with concern.

“But what?” Sakura prompted.

“I tried crossing back here a few times,” Kakuzu said. “I was…unable to. I had to jump among a few dimensions to finally make my way back here, which has never happened before.”

“Something prevented you from returning?” Sakura asked. “How is that even possible?”

Kakuzu shrugged in a particularly blase manner, but Sakura could read the concern in his eyes. “There was some sort of barrier between myself and Pompeii. I couldn’t reenter this reality. I was able to brush up against the barrier though and it felt…cosmological in nature.”

“Meaning?” Sakura asked.

“The essence of it was ancient, beyond myself or any of the denizens of Pompeii. I’ve felt such
things before, rarely, in my travels.” He squeezed her hand. “It is something that has existed since the beginning.”

“The beginning of what?” Sakura asked, a trickle of fear trailing down her spine.

“The beginning of all,” Kakuzu said. “The beginning of both natural and unnatural existence.”

Sakura read the spark of fear in Kakuzu’s eyes and felt her body go cold all over. For Kakuzu, a being who sifted the fabrics of time and space easily, to be frightened scared her even more. What could she possibly bring to the table? Sakura curled her ragged fingernails into her palms, scowling. Though there was little she could offer, she’d offer it still. That had to mean something.

It had to.

“It has been awhile since I last saw you here.”

Sakura glanced up, fighting the urge to fidget guiltily as she met Hiruzen’s gaze. She smoothed back her hair, knowing it was a futile gesture in the face of the war the magical books waged against her. The books on philosophy and the existence of the universe were apparently quite finicky about being handled and they weren’t afraid to let her know it.

“Things have been busy,” Sakura said, trying to keep from being defensive.

“Ah, you mean the tongues of the town have been busy,” Hiruzen said knowingly. Sakura flushed but did not disagree. “Unfortunately, Pompeii is kept running not by magic but by the gossip mill.”

“Sir?” Sakura said.

Hiruzen smiled, softening his harsh features to those of a genial elder. “Pompeii has abused you quite harshly. They’ve forgotten the services you’ve so willingly provided far too quickly. We may be long-lived creatures, but our memories appear to be much shorter lived.”

“You still do not believe this is my fault?” Sakura asked, chest tight with relief.

“Of course not,” Hiruzen said. “You, unlike many, have been seeking out the source.” He nodded to the pile of books. “Few have even considered coming by the library to use its knowledge. Besides, you know as well as I that there are far more likely candidates than you. The trees are the vessels for the attacks. I can think of only one individual who could possibly command the trees to act in a way so adverse to their nature.”

Sakura’s face fell. As much as she disliked Hashirama, especially the cold, easy calculation in his eyes whenever he looked at her, she didn’t think he’d destroy Pompeii. She’d seen his deep love for the town, quiet but profound. “Is he the only one with such abilities? Certainly, everyone seems to think he’s some sort of unique prodigy but he cannot be the only person to possess these particular gifts.”

Hiruzen eyed her with contemplation. “Perhaps,” he said. “Hashirama himself has experienced great tragedy in his life that may have driven him to such lengths. He lost two brothers in a skirmish with some nonmagical folk, centuries ago. Perhaps he believes he can bring them back, should he harness the powers of others. Besides, no one else with such power exists in Pompeii’s history.”

Sakura glanced down at the books in her arms. “Maybe not in its written history,” Sakura said. “No
one has recorded a firsthand account of Pompeii’s founding, right?”

“As far as we know,” Hiruzen said. “All is legend and speculation; secondhand accounts that create legends larger than life.”

“Perhaps they were more accurate than you think,” Sakura said, thinking to the knights in the forest. “If nothing else, Pompeii has taught me that truth is far stranger than fiction.”

Hiruzen chuckled, patting her shoulder. “You may be right, my dear. Would you like me to go ahead and check out your books?”

“One moment,” Sakura said, running back to the shelves. She scanned them, grabbing one and adding it to her pile.

“Legends and Tales of Our Supernatural Beginnings,” Hiruzen read, glancing quizzically at Sakura.

“Legend and speculation,” Sakura said, smile wry. “This is a land where everything is larger than life. What better stories to explore than those of the gods among the supernatural? Perhaps they will have some extraordinary solution to the problem on our hands.”

“I hope you find what you’re looking for,” Hiruzen said softly, leading her toward the front doors.

“As do I,” Sakura replied, nodding her thanks as he opened the door for her.

She stopped dead in her tracks.

Ahead of her, out in the courtyard of the library stood Tobirama, his arms crossed over his dark trench coat and green scarf. He was pale, paler than usual and Sakura knew it was the sickness within him. The stripes upon his face stood out clearly against his unhealthy translucent skin.

“Tobirama,” Hiruzen greeted, face unreadable as he moved to stand beside Sakura. “Are you feeling better? Hashirama let me know you’d fallen ill.”

“I couldn’t stay in bed,” Tobirama said, eyes focused intently on Sakura. She kept her gaze averted. He looked angry. And, considering the topic of her conversation with Hiruzen earlier, she couldn’t bring herself to look at him. It seemed unlikely for the brother of the potential perpetrator to show up so soon after the conversation. “There is too much going on to stay idly by.”

“And are you coming in?” Hiruzen asked mildly, ignoring the tension between Tobirama and Sakura.

“I can’t,” Tobirama said reluctantly, sneering up at them. “Why have you blocked the entrance against me? I thought all were free to learn here.”

“They are,” Hiruzen said. “I am not the one preventing you from using the library’s facilities.”

“Oh yeah?” Tobirama’s lips curled in pain as he looked at Sakura. “Are you erecting the barrier?”

“She is not responsible for it either,” Hiruzen said, voice still calm even in the face of Tobirama’s raw emotion. “The library is an extension of Pompeii itself; I nor anyone else has control over its whims.”

Tobirama reared back in offense, hands flashing briefly with gold energy. “What are you implying, Sarutobi?”
“Was that not clear enough for you?” Hiruzen asked blandly. “Allow me to be frank: Pompeii is the power here. If you are unable to walk up the steps of the library, then it must be because Pompeii wants it to be so. The question you should be considering is why Pompeii would do such a thing? It is rare for Pompeii to actually intercede in the physical realm. What have you done to incur the wrath of the town?” Tobirama’s eyes flashed to Sakura for but a moment before returning to Hiruzen, but Hiruzen caught it. “It seems you have some idea as to Pompeii’s reason for doing this.”

Tobirama opened his mouth for a moment before quickly closing it. He shook his head, turning away from them. Sakura and Hiruzen watched until he disappeared.

“Thank you,” Sakura said, warmed by Hiruzen’s defense of her.

Hiruzen smiled. “I like to fancy myself an observant individual. I pay attention to the town and those it likes or dislikes. You, my dear, are well liked by Pompeii. The town is a far better judge of character than myself or any of the other denizens. Do not give up hope yet.”

Sakura shifted the books before reaching out to loop an arm around Hiruzen’s neck. “Thank you for believing me.”

“Of course, my dear. Here,” Hiruzen gently turned her toward the courtyard once more. Now the pink brick led up to circle lining her apartment. “Head on home. The library is open to you whenever you need it.”

The quiet movement of water lulled Sakura as she flipped through the pages of the book. In her periphery, Marigold and Daffodil practiced swordplay with weapons that creaked with each strike against one another. The small shrine was an oasis in a sea of uncertainty, untouched by the dark mysteries of the forest. Truly, Sakura thought it the best location to attempt to unravel said mysteries.

She skimmed entries of land masses rising from fights among veritable titans, more interested in stories taking place after the formation of this world.

She paused on a story about deposing a magic drunk tyrant with unnatural fruit, tracing over the illustration that accompanied the text. “Peaches,” she murmured, eying the swollen fruits in contemplation.

Perhaps it was an unhappy coincidence, an odd tie between magic and this particular fruit. Sakura closed her eyes, a shadow of the sweet scent filling her lungs.

Perhaps not.

Something tapped the side of her head and Sakura flinched, turning to the source. Marigold stood there, the butt of its sword sliding down to rest against Sakura’s shoulder. It clutched the battered sheath within its hand, marigolds spilling over across the sword.

“Sorry,” Sakura said, smiling up at the knight. “Did I zone out?”

Daffodil came up alongside Marigold, slapping the back of its helmet. Daffodil seated itself beside Sakura, leaning against her shoulder.

“I was just reading through the stories,” Sakura said, sighing as she flipped through the pages listlessly. “I hoped for some answers. So far, not much has come up, but hope springs eternal…”
Daffodil patted her arm in sympathy.

“Actually, I did have some questions for you,” Sakura said, pondering on what Hiruzen told her earlier. “Are you, by chance, related by blood to the thing that’s harassing Pompeii?”

Marigold tapped its foot twice.

Sakura swallowed against a suddenly dry throat. Perhaps Hiruzen was right about Hashirama, though she didn’t want to believe it. “I know that the Maiden was involved the last time the forest acted up. What did she do specifically? Did she fight the entity?”

Marigold tapped twice for yes while Daffodil tapped once for no.

They looked at each other, crossing their arms.

Sakura frowned at the conflicting answers. Unfortunately, there was little they could do to communicate the apparent complexities across the simplistic channel they’d created.

“In the end, she sacrificed herself,” Sakura said, tracing along the gilt of the book’s lettering. “Is there any way to avoid the sacrifice of the self?”

The two knights turned their attention to her, but they did not respond.

Sakura felt a chill run down her spine and she rubbed at her arms.

“Yeah,” she said, pausing to clear her throat at the thickness that lodged there. “That was what I was afraid of.”

They stayed in silence for several long moments as Sakura contemplated the worn, tidy shrine across the pond from her. The Maiden, whoever she was, had been willing to give her life for this place, before it was even Pompeii.

“So,” Sakura said softly, keeping her gaze to the book. “Where did this grand showdown take place?”

Golden light filled her peripherals. Sakura blinked before lifting her head. All of the hairs on her neck and arms stood on end.

At the very edge of the protective circle of the sanctuary, a will-o’-the-wisp bounced up and down, a buoy on a waveless ocean of air. Twenty feet beyond it, Sakura saw another, and another further beyond it.

The forest was beckoning to her.

The two knights stepped in front of her, hands to their swords.

“It’s alright,” Sakura said, shaking her head. “It hasn’t come to that; it won’t come to that. I won’t let it.”

She stood, stepping around until she was alongside the shrine. Sakura placed her hand on it, a sense of calm overcoming her in the moment. Silvery wisps of light threaded over and across her hand, encircling her wrist.

“It won’t end the same way this time.”
Sakura tiptoed through the garden, clutching the notice-me-nots close to her chest. Imbued as they were with an enhancement from Shizune, Sakura knew no one was going to see her but she couldn’t keep from being nervous as she heard voices from within the house.

She did her utmost to ignore them, focusing instead on the lattice that trailed upward to a small balcony. Sakura tucked the packet of notice-me-nots into her bra, pulling on her gloves before testing the lattice. It was, as she expected, quite sturdy beneath her grip. Thorns bit into the gloves, but left Sakura’s skin unscathed. Sakura hoisted herself onto the lattice, trying to avoid crushing the pale purple roses as she climbed. She swung herself over the railing of the balcony, landing softly.

The curtains were drawn and Sakura looked in.

The room was tidy and rich with all sorts of wall hangings and maps. A large desk filled with books and knick knacks stood in one corner. In the other was a large bed piled high with blankets. Beneath those blankets lay Ino, face waxy and wan even at this distance.

Sakura pressed at the door, unsurprised to find it locked. She wiggled her credit card between the double doors, shaking her head when, after a few moments of maneuvering, the doors swung open. The lack of security was appalling, though it certainly explained how Kin and the rest survived even as veritable outcasts of Pompeii.

She pressed into the room, hating the stale taste of magic and medicine that lingered heavily in the air. It was nearly suffocating and Sakura knew it wasn’t good for Ino, magical disease or no. No one needed to live like this.

Sakura approached the bed, heart sinking the closer she got to Ino. Ino’s face was sunken and pallid, aging her far beyond her supernatural youthfulness. For once, she almost looked her true age. Lines of sickly green ran close to the surface beneath her skin, interconnected pathways that didn’t follow any normal physiological pattern. Sakura guessed that they traced the veins of magic that wove throughout Ino’s very being, marking her essence as different from that of a human. Patches of skin were covered with dull feathers, many shed among the blankets that encompassed her body.

Sakura swallowed against her suddenly dry throat, as she came face-to-face with the extent of Ino’s illness. Ino was a latecomer to the sickness, the symptoms appearing only a week and a half ago. How much worse off were the early victims?

How much closer to death were they?

Sakura pulled the notice-me-nots away from her skin and brushed Ino’s sweaty hair out of her face.

Ino stirred, blinking bleary cornflower blue eyes. “Sakura?” she asked in a husky voice.

“Hey,” Sakura greeted, movements gentle as she began to braid Ino’s hair out of her face. She didn’t ask how Ino was doing. They both knew it was a trite question and Sakura feared the answer. She strummed a thumb across Ino’s far too pronounced cheekbone. “I’ve missed you.”

“I miss you too,” Ino said. She startled, grabbing Sakura’s hand as she struggled to sit up. “Do my parents know you’re here? They’re angry, even though I told them—”

“It’s alright,” Sakura soothed, showing her the notice-me-nots. “I hadn’t realized how unusual the potted flowers you’ve gifted me with were until Yamato told me. Were you preparing for a situation like this?”
Ino huffed a laugh, for a moment looking younger and brighter. “I am all knowing.”

Sakura grinned, turning Ino’s hand palm up so she could trace spiraling patterns over it. “I should listen to you more often.”

“You should,” Ino agreed. She clamped her hand around Sakura’s fingers, waiting until Sakura looked at her. “Listen to what I’m saying now. You need to leave Pompeii.”

“What?” Sakura flinched away from her.

“Pompeii is getting worse,” Ino said. “I hear them talking sometimes, when they think I’m sleeping—you have to leave. It’s too dangerous for you to stay.”

“Ino—”

“No!” Ino said, grimacing before falling back into her bed. She coughed and Sakura eased her back into a more comfortable situation. “Sakura, please.” Tears streamed down her face as her voice rasped out of her chest. “I love you. You can’t die a pointless death; not here, not for Pompeii.”

“I won’t,” Sakura said, bowing her head over Ino’s until their foreheads nearly touched. “I won’t. But I’m not leaving, not yet. If I must…well, I’m making arrangements.”

“Good,” Ino said, eyes falling shut. “Good. I’m so tired…”

“Rest,” Sakura replied. “All will be well soon.” She leaned in and pressed a kiss to Ino’s forehead. She tucked the notice-me-nots back into her clothing, watching as Ino drifted into an uneasy sleep.

“I love you too.” Sakura said, taking one last look at Ino before stepping out onto the balcony. “And I won’t be repeating history.”
Sakura realized, in a strange mix of pride and dread, that Netflix was actually sending her automated messages asking her if she was alright based on the logged hours of activity in recent weeks. She logged out of her account and decided she should probably cool it when it came to the Korean dramas.

“Damn those cliffhangers,” Sakura muttered under her breath. It had been so much easier to get lost in a few television shows and tune out the rest of the world’s happenings than the research and reading she had promised herself she would get to.

Also the headaches.

Sakura pushed her laptop away from her and checked the clock from the stove for the time. She had slept in again and was neglecting the rituals and routines that once kept her so faithfully on track. She hadn’t made a breakfast for herself or taken a shower.

She sought out the bathroom first and stripped to stand in the shower. Fifteen minutes later she was padding barefoot across the floor with her hair in a towel, reading the directions on her phone for the location of her first on site interview. She had passed the phone call interview earlier that week and tomorrow was the first they could see her. Sakura thought she had a good feeling about her chances, but didn’t want to be overconfident.

“Do you need to?”

Sakura almost dropped her phone as she jumped, turning to find Sai sulking on her couch with his knees drawn up in front of his chin. He glared at her mournfully over the edge of his knees.

“Sai, we talked about this. It’s better than relocating. If I commute I can still live here with you and Yamato and I won’t have to worry about risking my life every time I open the clinic.”

He lifted his head a little. “Why do you need to work? I make money. I can buy you anything you want.”

“I’m not taking your money from you. It’s yours. You should be able to do what you want with it.”

“I want to give it to you.”

“Th-that’s not what I meant, Sai.” Sakura couldn’t help but laugh. He made things sound so simple.

“I don’t need money like you do. I never needed money or wanted it. I have everything I want right here, and she has to go away all day because of something stupid like money. What good is it to have money if it makes you sad?”

“Some of us have debts and bills and financial needs that can’t be so easily bartered,” Sakura explained, while reminiscing on how countercultural Pompeii was with its way of doing business. It was like a place out of time. Money changed hands, yes, but so did promises, wishes, tokens, and favors. Pompeii was unique but Pompeii was also dangerous for her.

“I told you we could help you with those. You don’t want our help.” Sai’s head shot up and the glare was back. “Why do you have to be like this? All you need is us.”
Sakura saw his chin tremble. It was only a little, and anyone who didn’t know Sai nearly as well as she did would have missed it. Anyone else would have see his glare and not the brokenness. Anyone else would have missed it, but not Sakura.

She crossed to room, dropping her phone onto the table and reaching for his face. He pulled away at first but when she made an effort to follow with her hands he didn’t resist. Sakura held his face and ran her thumbs up over his cheeks, under his eyes. Her contact made his glare melt and his gaze go hazy. Holding his head she could feel how soft his skin was and all the micro tremors that shook him with each shaky breath.

“Never,” she began in a low whispering tone, “doubt that I love you, Sai.” She bent over and kissed the crown of his skull and she felt his arms reach out to pull her closer as the tremors intensified.

A year ago he was a boy with half baked emotions. Now he didn’t know what to do with all the pain he felt because of them.

Sakura ran her fingers through his hair, petting it back like he was a scared animal that needed the contact. He leaned into her touch and his arms encircled her higher up on her waist, tugging her closer still. His face was buried in her stomach and she could feel that part of her shirt growing damp, but she didn’t remark on it.

“Can I make you breakfast?” she finally asked.

“It’s one in the afternoon,” came the muffled reply.

“Oh, you’re right. I guess that makes it lunch.”

Sai inhaled deeply and rubbed his face in the fabric before pulling away slightly. Sakura could see his pout but little else of his expression stood out.

“Fine,” he muttered.

It had been a while since he made a scene for attention, but Sakura wouldn’t complain. Sai was still learning how to express his emotions and deal with his feelings. Some things like anger and frustration came easier than others. He was like a child in some regards, learning and growing like any young kid would. Sakura didn’t hate it, she couldn’t. She felt proud to see him grow.

Sakura smiled wide and clapped to get his attention. “Alright. How about something sweet like waffles and strawberries? I have whipped cream I think.”

“What about chocolate sprinkles?” Sai reached up to flatten the upturned parts of his hair and then glanced up at Sakura. “I could go out and buy some if you don’t have any.”

Sakura remembered the list of things she needed and turned to grab it off the side of her fridge. “If you don’t mind, while you’re out there getting sprinkles can you grab these few things too. I’m a bit low on groceries.”

Sai took the list, glanced at it only once before stuffing it in his pocket and standing. Sakura was reaching for her purse to fish out money but Sai was already waving his hand and protesting. “Put that away, this is stuff I’ll eat anyway! Geez.” Sai backed up towards the door, watching Sakura the whole time. “I’m going out but I’ll be back soon. Don’t eat all the waffles without me. I’ll be right back.”

“I believe you,” Sakura laughed.
The door closed behind him and Sakura heard Sai’s footsteps skip stairs in his descent.

*Cute*

The room spun for a heartbeat and Sakura had to reach for something to stay upright. It was a jerkish reaction, but as soon as it came it passed, leaving a splitting headache in its wake. Sakura had to bite her knuckles as the worst throbs of pain washed over her and then abated. It took a minute more before she could stand and reach for water. The pills to kill her pain shook in her palm but she managed to swallow them down.

“Please stop,” Sakura prayed in some form of blind desperation, not knowing who was listing. For that matter, she didn’t even know who was hurting her in the first place, but there was a voice that crippled her to hear. Something in her head echoed like a blood sore.

Sakura leaned against the wall and slid down to sit on the floor, holding a fistful of hair by its roots. She could feel the tears and knew she needed to gather herself if she wanted to look okay by the time Sai, or worse Yamato, walked in on her. They’d both freak out if they knew about the voice she kept hearing.

It had started a few days ago, and the first time was more odd than painful, but after that first time the voice came back with maybe a single word or phrase to tear a bloody path through her brain. The pain was so bad it was hard to remember what the voice sounded like or what it was even trying to say. Sometimes she thought they were words in a different language and then other times she thought they were words that she could understand, just not remember because of the pain.

This time the comment had been about Sai. Something called Sai the same time Sakura thought the same exact thing. Her Sai was cute and honest and she adored him. Someone or something else seemed to think so too.

Sakura didn’t know if it was a psychic in Pompeii or someone else paying off a curse to plague her in retribution for the sickness that had grown so severe it even claimed Hashirama—a man who was famous for never falling ill for all the centuries he had been alive.

‘The Good Neighbors don’t get sick!’

More and more people in Pompeii were freaking out and growing more vocal about their suspicions. Even her friends...or the people she thought of as friends, were joining the mobs. There was talk about her seducing Sarutobi and tricking others to make it seem like Pompeii was protecting her.

‘Cute’ had been what the voice said. And it meant Sai. Her Sai.

Sakura’s fingers tugged at the clump of hair and she seethed as one of the last rolls of pain swept through her.

“Don’t you dare look at him,” she seethed to the emptiness of her room.

For the first time she addressed the voice in her head. Maybe it was someone from Ino’s family or a witch from the Uzumaki clan, but it didn’t matter if that person was trying to hurt her through her precious people. She might not have many of them left, but she was fierce with the ones she called family.

“Leave....Sai alone!”

For a moment there was nothing, not even pain, and then, like a cloud passing over the sun unexpectedly, the voice was back in her head louder and more clear than ever before.
“You consider this one important to you. What a shame it would be if your family broke up… because of you.”

Sakura couldn’t breath the pain was running down her spine and threatening to make her head explode. She felt like what she was hearing wasn’t meant for her brain the handle. She wasn’t supposed to be comprehending something so big.

She hadn’t felt anything like this and never expected to feel anything like this in the safety of her home with all the wards and charms and protection from Pompeii itself. She wasn’t supposed to be hurting she wasn’t-

“Get out!” Sakura snapped, suddenly full of something that burned in her. “Get out of my head-out!”

No one could harm her. No one could hurt her. No one would touch her inside her own home. She believed Pompeii wouldn’t allow it in the same way she believed there was a sun underneath the shade of a passing cloud.

Her brain burned with pain that shot to every part of her but it was a swansong and as soon as it passed there was an unexpected emptiness. The voice was gone and there was a hole left behind.

Something had left her and something in her gut told her it slithered back to the forest. She didn’t know why, or where the feeling came from, just that it was there.

Sakura let go of her hair and stood up. She brushed the dust off her pants and turned to the kitchen where her waffle iron was already out. She plugged it in and began mixing the batter mix together with the last of her wet ingredients. By the time Sai came back she would be fine. He had a long shift at the tattoo parlor in a few hours so once he set out she could do her own sort of investigation.

-  
The forest was like she remembered it, until it wasn’t. There were so many flowering trees that it was hard to remember what the wooded lands looked like without them. Some of the trees looked distressed too. Someone had hacked a few down to wood chips and there were signs of burns on the ground, but the trees seemed to be fire retardant.

She remember when the mob tried to burn the effigy of her made out of twigs. That hadn’t worked as well as they had hoped. Maybe some of those same people had split up to swarm the woods in search of some way to destroy what they didn’t understand.

She didn’t understand why they didn’t seek out the library. Sure, she had been having only a little luck with her own search, but she didn’t have the background some of these other citizens have! She started from nothing and at least she had some clues.

She saw something silver and turned to see the gleaming head of an ax stuck in the body of a tree that had since swelled up around the metal. Tearing it out to strike at the tree looked impossible with the edge that deeply wedged in.

Sasori

The redhead had been absent from the scene and Sakura had at first assumed it was because of whatever he felt about the whole situation, be it shame or remorse she didn’t care. Yamato had been the one to tell her about the strange ailment that rendered his body immobile. He wasn’t sick, but he was afflicted a new and unique way...something Chiyo still hadn’t forgiven Sakura for.

Sakura inspected one of the trees that looked as if it had been splashed in acid. Pockmarks scarred
the bark and the flowers were stripped in places.

Sakura thought she smelled peaches but couldn’t see any when she turned.

“Hello?” she called.

There was no answer.

She then thought better about calling out into the forest without knowing if there was someone about who still wanted to burn her at the stake.

Sakura found her way deeper into the forest until she came to the place where she would normally meet with the knight brothers in all their blooming glory. Today they were out and about and that was fine. They would come back in an instant if they needed to. They were like that.

The shrine to the maiden sat alone and unprotected but not entirely defenseless. It hadn’t escaped her notice how the blooms and petals from the flowering trees seemed to avoid the shrine. There was no unnatural wind to account for it, but something kept those sort of trees and blossoms away from the shrine.

Sakura likely hadn’t noticed it last time because the amount of blossoms had gone from impressive to near overwhelming. It was nearing the spring season, after all.

“Has it been a year since this all started?” Sakura asked the shrine, knowing it wouldn’t respond.

It was still a little early for the yearly anniversary of the event she suspected to be the catalyst for all their troubles, and so much had happened. She had seen highs and she had seen lows. She hoped soon things would change for the better, but doubted it.

“I have an interview tomorrow,” Sakura said. “I don’t know if it’s the right thing to do, but I don’t feel like I have much of an option anymore.”

Like before, there was only silence.

Sakura chuckled and stuffed her hands back into the pockets of her sweatshirt. She shook her head ruefully and looked up at the sky. It was getting late and she had better get back if she wanted a good enough sleep to sustain her throughout the next day.

“Maybe the next time I come back here things will be different,” Sakura said in parting.

No one answered, but she waved back over her shoulder, suspecting someone or something could see her as she left. Maybe they would make her words a prophecy. Maybe.

- 

It was less an interview and more of an introduction to the clinic where they wanted Sakura to start working. She had showed up in her nice suit with another copy of everything they asked for the first time, and had been swiftly swept up into a flurry of introductions that seemed too warm for what she had come to anticipate.

“So you’re the new transfer?”

Sakura turned at the sound of the voice and saw a young man in scrubs. She remembered seeing him in between the hallways but hadn’t been introduced yet. He looked young, but not so young that he seemed out of place. Maybe he was a year or few older than her, but he still had a boyish smile that
likely helped his bedside manner. “Yeah, that would be me. I heard you were all looking for another MD to add to your staff. You already have so many here though, so I was a bit surprised.” She extended her hand for a shake and added, “I’m Sakura.”

He took her hand and shook it firmly, the boyish smile staying in place. “Keith, another MD just like you. I’m glad you could make it out here. We had been considering expanding since the facility hasn’t reached peak capacity yet and so many of the older members on staff want to start phasing out.”

“Busy is good,” Sakura laughed, looking back. “Where I was previously, it was the total opposite.”

“Oh really? You were overstaffed for the patients?” he asked, sounding like he hadn’t heard of such a thing happening.

Sakura forced herself to laugh again. “What can you do when they just stop walking in? The town was small and they really didn’t need me.”

“That’s so unusual.” He shook his head as if to clear the thought and the boyish smile was back. “Well, I’m sorry it didn’t work out with the last place, but change doesn’t always have to be a bad thing.”

“Sakura felt a weight slide off her heart and she breathed a little easier. The smile was easier to keep up as she responded. “You’re right. I’m sorry to be leaving friends and family, but I’m excited to experience a change in pace with my work life.”

“I’m glad,” he laughed along with her. “It’d be nice to have a new face around here.” He ended with a wink and the promise that they would see each other some other time.

Sakura felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see the woman in charge of hiring. The name escaped her and she mentally panicked behind the mask of a perfect smile. The older woman nodded at the male doctor’s back and chuckled. “Don’t mind him, he’s such a flirt. A good doctor, but he is a terrible flirt with all the available staff.”

“Oh no, I have no experience with that at all, ever,” Sakura said in fake monotone until both women were snickering together.

“Oh you’re such a sweet thing. You’ll fit right in!”

Sakura laughed, but couldn’t help but feel something like unease grow in her heart as she climbed back into the borrowed car and turned it towards the road that would lead to Pompeii.

Once people weren't watching her Sakura allowed her expressions to fall apart on their own. Her chest was tight in a way that couldn’t be explained away with anything other than anxiety. She had left Pompeii for a single, simple interview, but something was seriously wrong about that.

Wrong, wrong, wrong

There was no voice this time, but Sakura felt it in her heart that something was wrong before she even got to the borderline. For over an hour she stewed in those feelings and it showed on the speedometer as she pushed the needle further across the warning numbers.
In record time she was over that invisible line and de-accelerating to coast into the downtown where no one and nothing seemed active. That wasn’t anything new, but once she she came close enough to see the clinic she knew better.

She parked the car haphazardly half on the sidewalk half off, scrambling out without regard for stupid things like closing the door or grabbing her purse behind her.

The clinic was split open like a ripe fruit with sprawling branches and swollen trunks splitting the space apart. She had always been safe inside the clinic, but for some reason now it wasn’t as impervious to harm as she first believed it to be. The smell of peaches was almost overwhelming.

“Sai, Yamato!”

Sakura screamed, tearing off and darting into the mess that used to be a clinic. Parts of the outside were inside and furniture from inside was skewered through and hanging out on spear shaped branches.

Inside was more of the same dark mess and Sakura was frantic, trying to climb her way up to the second floor, only to fall through the gaps and brittle parts of the trees. She felt her clothes tear and her nicely styled hair come undone but she didn’t care as she scrambled with bloody fingers and bare feet through the mess.

“SAI! YAMATO!”

She didn’t care who heard her anymore. She knew that Sai should have been home at this time at least. His shift ended a little after she took off for her interview. He would have been at home.

Something moved and Sakura saw a pale hand with bloody fingers grabbing weakly at the thin branches folded over each other. Sakura withdrew her knife and cut the dying branches away and reached into the hole to grab at Sai’s arm. She felt a cold wetness instantly and the dread magnified in her chest.

“Shizune, Yamato!” Sakura screamed as she hacked away more of the branches.

No one was answering after she screamed again, but she didn’t stop, Sakura stabbed at the trunks and they collapsed as if they had been old and dead for centuries.

Sakura felt her face dirty and wet with tears as she finally was able to open up a hole big enough to lift Sai up out of. He shouldn’t have been so easy to lift, but she didn’t know if that was because of her strength or his lack of weight.

Wet sobs wracked her as she pulled Sai to her and turned him around. He was hurt in too many places and bleeding everywhere.

“Sa-Sakura.”

“Shut up,” Sakura wetly interrupted, carrying him bridal style down the way she had come.

It was easier to make it back down to the ground and even with him in her arms, Sakura was able to kick her way into one of the old service rooms. It was a mess, but she turned over a table to lay him down on and then raced for her tools.

She was frantic but oddly focused like it was her life that hung in the balance as she cleaned and stitched Sai up. She had to remove shards of tree from his side and cursed every fragment she extracted.
Sai was quiet as she worked, being barely conscious, but Sakura wouldn’t let him fall asleep on her just yet. He had hit his head and lost too much blood for that.

She was a universal donor. It would be okay.

“Sai, what happened?” Sakura gasped, staring down at him as the red fluids moved from her to him. He looked terrible, but she swore he would make it through. He would heal from this.

“Don’t know, it happened too fast and there was no one we could see, just the trees and then-then-”

His words were lost in a hiss as it became painful to breath, but a moment later it passed and he stared up at her, eyes wet with his own sorrow. He had always been pale but now he looked more like a ghost than ever.

“Then it took Yamato.”
“We have to move,” Sakura said, keeping pressure on Sai’s abdomen. She glanced at the ruins around her, spilling out of the buildings as yolk from an egg. “We aren’t safe here.”

“What do you have in mind?” Sai asked, pale face streaked in sweat.

“I don’t know; there’s so few people we can trust,” Sakura replied. “And everyone who I do trust is too ill to be of much help.”

“Pompeii knows your needs, child.”

Sakura flinched, throwing herself over Sai to shield him from another attack. Then the words and the voice registered. “Hiruzen?”

“Indeed,” Hiruzen said, kneeling down at her side. His lips were tight and skin ashy as he took in their surroundings and Sai’s state, but his gaze was resolute as he addressed her. “What do you need?”

“The library,” Sakura said, looking beyond him to the looming structure. It was the safest structure within Pompeii that she knew of. “Sai will be safe there.”

“Was anyone else injured?” Hiruzen asked as he positioned himself at Sai’s legs and Sakura grabbed beneath his armpits.

“No one in the rubble,” Sakura said, grunting as she lifted Sai. She’d lifted heavier during rotation, but she was long out of practice. “Shizune is out but Yamato…” She fell silent, unwilling to give voice to what happened.

“I see.” Hiruzen paled further. “Well, let’s tend to this one here.”

They managed to get Sai into the library without too much fanfare. Sakura noticed the presence in her mind slip away, claws unable to stay sunk into her, the moment she crossed the threshold. Pompeii was still stronger than the entity. She and Hiruzen laid Sai out on a couch and Sakura bit her lip as she examined him. It wasn’t good.

“I’m fine,” Sai said, checking the way her eyes lingered on the wet patches soaking through his clothes.

“We never did get around to teaching you how to lie with conviction,” Sakura said in a trembling voice. Sai reached out, trying to grab her hand and missing by a mile. Sakura gave it to him anyway, hating how cool his skin felt beneath hers.

“He will be alright,” Hiruzen soothed as he stepped back into the room. He brandished medical supplies. “Pompeii will provide.”

“You keep saying that,” Sakura muttered, squeezing Sai’s hand once before taking over from Hiruzen and sliding on the calm persona she donned with every patient.

She couldn’t fall apart, not yet. Her hands remained steady as she cut away Sai’s shirt. Hiruzen set up a bag of O-negative blood before passing her a hypodermic needle. She took it,
glancing askance at the bag of blood, remembering her thoughts only moments ago.

Exactly what was needed…

She ran through the motions of situating the IV perfectly, before stepping closer to Sai again. “I’ll be back soon,” she said, seeing the way his eyes listed away from her. He was drifting on the edge of unconsciousness and she wouldn’t take it from him. “I’m just getting the rest of the family.”

“Family,” Sai murmured, eyes sliding shut.

“That’s right,” Sakura crooned, brushing his sweat-soaked hair out of his face. “We’ll be together again soon. We’ll watch more ridiculous movies and finish setting up Yamato’s Etsy account.”

“You’re going after him,” Hiruzen said, more statement than question.

“Of course,” she replied, briskly making her way into the lavatory and washing up. Hiruzen trailed her. Such habits died slowly. “I won’t leave Yamato to fend for himself against that thing, whatever it is.” She paused for a moment, looking into the ornate mirror before her. She was stained in blood and grime and her hands shook, but her eyes were hard, prepared for what came next. Good. “You said Pompeii provided. Will it provide for me now?”

Hiruzen’s mouth tugged down at the corner, a sadness lurking there. “Let’s find out.”

He led her back into the foyer, passing by Sai and heading into a part of the library Sakura had never visited. The entrance so small and plain that Sakura barely saw it even as she looked upon it. It opened into a small alcove where a beaded tapestry hung.

The tapestry depicted a massive volcano in glittering detail and a woman surrounded by shadowy figures, dressed in gleaming gold. She was lovely, hair whipping around her, a hurricane unto herself. Her face was upturned and arms opened wide, almost as if she planned to embrace the volcano itself.

Sakura’s heart jumped as she recognized them from the ritual months ago.

“Founding Day?” she asked.

“Founding Day,” Hiruzen confirmed. “The day Pompeii was born out of one woman’s sacrifice. This is where Pompeii offers assistance to those it deems worthy.”

Dazed by the dazzling tapestry as she was, it took Sakura some time to realize that something sat at the base of the tapestry, perched upon a pedestal. She knelt down and lifted the object free. It was a small black blade, barely a knife that reflected the light of the hall and the beads.

“What is it?” Sakura asked, running a thumb along the edge. It was dull, unable to cut even her flesh.

“It is Pompeii’s offering to you,” Hiruzen said, peering over her shoulder. “It appears to be made of obsidian.”

“Right,” Sakura said, clutching the small knife close to her chest. She felt a sort of kinship to the dull blade. Just like her, it seemed out of place and practically useless in the face of the situation at hand. Still, she would do anything and everything within her power to bring Yamato back.

*You hear that, bitch? I’m coming for you*, Sakura said to the voice in her head.

It remained silent, remote within Pompeii’s domain.
“You’re decided then?” Hiruzen asked, accompanying her once more to the foyer.

“It took Yamato,” Sakura said simply. And it was simple. There was no choice to make here; she would go. Her gaze went to Sai again, taking in his returning color. “Keep an eye on Sai for me.” Sakura looked down at the knife. “If I don’t return... go to Shizune. She can treat Sai and get him out of here.”

“Of course,” Hiruzen replied, expression and tone unreadable. “Good luck Sakura. And take heart, Pompeii is on your side.”

Sakura smiled mirthlessly, fingers fisting around the simple handle to the obsidian blade. “So it seems. Stay safe.”

And she left him there, stepping out into reality once more. Hiruzen stared after her, lips moving wordlessly. Finally, he whispered, “Please, do not let history repeat today,” before scurrying back to attend Sai.

Sakura emerged back into the wreckage of her clinic and home. With nary a whisper, the library behind her disappeared. She knew it wouldn’t reappear for her for quite some time.

Pompeii wanted her to fight.

Thankfully, their goals were aligned.

She picked her way through the remains, taking in the ruination of the place she once called home. There were bits of machinery she recognized, clothes rent to pieces, and bobbles broken and strewn among the branches. She trepidly climbed the stairs to take in the damage done within the apartment. The sickeningly sweet scent of peaches perfumed the air, heavy to the point of nauseating. The interior of the apartment was much the same as the clinic, tree limbs smashed through everything of value. She paused as one in particular caught her attention.

The battered, worn front of the journal was stabbed clean through with a large branch. Pages, once filled with a dry and sharp wit, were strewn beneath it. Sakura approached it and lifted it free gently, hands trembling as she opened it.

Nothing. There was absolutely nothing on the pages. The hole left by the branch was obscene and gaping, obscuring the areas where jokes and secrets were shared. As she ran her hands over it, Sakura knew the magic within the journal was dead, leached from its pages by the forest entity.

Softly, almost reverently, Sakura placed the journal into her knapsack, before venturing further into the apartment. A quick ten minute search turned up a few of her protective items, her omamori, her dream catcher, and the knife Sai gave her long ago. Sakura donned them now, threading the dream catcher onto the necklace that held the omamori. She looked ridiculous but she didn’t care. She needed all of the protection she could get.

Such meagre trinkets won’t help you. That paltry diary certainly did not.

Sakura ignored the voice, weaving her way out of the rubble. She looked back only once. The entity’s destruction had been thorough and complete. The clinic and her home, their home, was gone.

She didn’t think she would rebuild. She’d invested too much into this physical property, her hopes,
her dreams...she’d called it home. But home wasn’t a place, it was the people. And she had to get her home back. They’d start over somewhere else, somewhere new.

You won’t be given the chance I’m afraid. Your services are required elsewhere.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Sakura said, ignoring the way the voice made her head throb.

The voice receded for the time being and Sakura turned her back on the clinic, refusing to look at it again. Instead, she traipsed into the forest, knowing already where she needed to go.

As she made her way deeper into the forest, Sakura noticed the strangeness to it. The trees were darker than usual and seemingly restless, moving and writhing in her peripheral vision. Never did they move in her direct line of sight. The branches seemed more gnarled and twisted than usual. And the leaves rustled with heavy whispers in languages long dead.

“It’s been you since the start,” Sakura said softly, remembering her arrival to Pompeii. “Even then you were planning...waiting for the perfect opportunity.”

The presence in her mind stayed silent but Sakura could feel the smugness radiating from it. She scoffed, deciding to ignore the whispers of the trees as she continued on...until she found she could not.

Sakura frowned, looking down at herself. Her legs refused to lift, despite her struggle. Her shadow stretched beyond her eerily, meeting that of Shikamaru.

He stood before her, expression set and serious as he concentrated on holding her in place. “No more of this, Sakura,” he said, voice resolute. “Your reign of terror ends here today.”

“Shikamaru,” Sakura greeted, mouth flat. She didn’t have time for this. “What brings you out here today?”

“You,” he replied. “I’ve seen you sneak off to the forest on a number of occasions. It wasn’t too hard to figure out your usual path.”

“And this confrontation just had to happen today, right now?”

“People are nearing the end,” Shikamaru said. “Choji collapsed earlier this week. Ino is on death’s doorstep and Naruto...well I’m here to end it all.”

Sakura’s pulse quickened. “You plan on killing me?”

“No,” Shikamaru said. “Not if I can help it.”

Sakura remembered his expression as he watched the effigy of her burn just scant days ago. “If you can help it,” she repeated, shaking her head. “Shikamaru, this will end today, one way or another. I’m not responsible for this mess; go take a look at my clinic and home for abundant evidence of that. The thing behind this, the forest entity, it has Yamato. For whatever reason, it wants me.” Her lips curled into a mockery of a smile. “I plan on giving it what it wants.”

Shikamaru’s hands slackened momentarily and Sakura took a half step before his powers took hold once more.

“I can’t allow you to escape,” he said and Sakura could read the fear in his eyes, taste it in the sweat that beaded his brow. “There’s too much at stake.”
“Shikamaru, no!” Sakura yelled as the voice pierced her mind, reverberating off itself and compounding into a migraine. “Run!”

The trees around Shikamaru leapt to life, attacking him. He dodged sideways, breaking his connection with Sakura as a particularly wily limb caught his leg. Sakura immediately strode forward, palming the knives in both hands. The trees were shaking wildly, the ground tearing beneath them as some uprooted themselves and dogged after Shikamaru. He disappeared in the sea of moving trees.

Sakura drove the knives into the branches closest to her, drawing the same strange gold ichor as it had during the incident at the Hyuga Manor.

The resulting shriek both within her mind and outside of it deafened Sakura as she pulled the knives free and clutched at her ears. Her fingers met wetness and, as she pulled away, she saw the bright crimson of her blood.

Ears ringing, migraine pounding, and beyond dizzy and disoriented, Sakura did what she could to position herself to fight the writhing mass of trees.

Two flashes passed her periphery and Sakura looked up, blinking as her knights dove into the fray.

“Daffodil! Mari!” she called, her voice sounding to her as if she was underwater.

She frowned.

Daffodil waved at her jauntily before motioning past it, back toward the path she’d been taking before Shikamaru accosted her.

“Save him, please,” she requested.

Mari turned her way for a moment, inclining its head before striking a particularly savage strike against the mass.

With the situation well in the hands of the knights, Sakura returned to the path, ignoring the way her ears rang and her equilibrium ran haywire.

“Hold on, Yamato,” she said to herself, her voice still sounding distant but centering nonetheless, a prayer or promise of sorts. “I’m coming.”

Sakura ran into the clearing of the shrine, pausing to take in the scene before her. Things were not as she left them.

A large, sprawling peach tree took up most of the clearing. Heavy, perfect peaches hung from its branches, attractive in nature. Everything about them drew Sakura in, but something underneath, on a very basic, animal level repulsed her. They were unnatural, inhuman, the very antithesis of humanity. Sakura’s mouth watered as the fruity scent hit her nostrils, filling her with promises of vitality and riches and dreams fulfilled. Sakura closed her eyes as the pain of the migraine throbbed viciously, nearly blinding her.

She reopened her eyes what may have been moments or minutes later, black spots dotting her vision.
Sakura saw now that the faded, forgotten shrine of the Maiden was split in two, sundered by the tree. And there, beside the pond, hung Yamato.

He was ensconced within the tree itself, the bark growing around his body and limbs. His face peeked out beneath the shade of the branches and Sakura ran forward, wading her way through the pond.

“Yamato!” she screamed. Sakura scrambled to shore, clutching the sides of Yamato’s face. His eyes fluttered for a moment but remained closed. “Yamato!” she repeated, leaning in and pressing her forehead to his. He was warm beneath her and his breath was moist against her neck. He was alive.

“I’m here,” she said softly. She traced his cheek, picking away at the bark that marred it. “I’m here.”

Cute.

Sakura whirled, immediately throwing her arms out behind her, trying to span the trunk to protect Yamato.

A woman stood across the pond, regarding her with a canted head. She was preternaturally pale, horns framing her head. Everything about her was crisp, white, and austere, startling against the greenery behind her. In the middle of her forehead was a third, crimson eye.

“It’s you,” Sakura breathed, unable to hear herself. This was the being, the forest entity who harangued her for over a year. Fear blazed up Sakura’s spine in the face of this alien creature, so unlike anything she’d experienced in her life. Her eyes slid back toward Yamato and the fear abated as fury surged forth. “You can’t have him.”

The woman opened her mouth and spoke, though all Sakura heard was ringing and the chiming of bells.

Ah, I did more damage than I first expected. A pity how fragile you are. I do not wish to possess your consort, he was merely a means to an end.

“And what end was that?” Sakura asked.

You, my dear girl.

“Me,” Sakura said. “You wanted me. Why?”

The woman smiled, a slow, sinuous thing that was beyond human. Sakura shivered at the woman’s display of pointy teeth. You’re so ordinary and plain, which is exactly what I require. You are one of the few who can complete the task at hand.

“And this task required you to alienate me from the rest of Pompeii, for you to torture me and mine for months on end?” Sakura asked, looking again to Yamato who remained unconscious.

Watch your tone! Sakura clamped her hands over her ears as the woman’s voice shook Sakura’s mind. Sakura squeezed her eyes shut, grimacing as something leaked from her eyes. She knew without checking that it was blood. She’d popped a vessel. Be careful how you address this one, chit. I have waited millennia for this very moment.

“And how shall I address you?” Sakura asked, keeping her tone even.

I have been called by many names: the Devourer, the Scourge, Empress, Goddess. The name of my choosing is Princess Kaguya.
“What do you want from me?” Sakura asked, voice soft.

*It’s quite simple,* Kaguya replied, striding out into the pond. She walked upon the water, slight ripples disrupting the pond beneath her feet. *Pluck a peach for me.*

“A peach,” Sakura said, looking overhead.

The boughs of the tree dipped her way, offering ripe peaches for her inspection. The skin was soft and fuzzy and oh so mesmerizing…

Yamato groaned, snapping Sakura from the trance. She scowled, returning her gaze to the woman.

“Why don’t you take one for yourself?”

Kaguya’s angelic, alien visage twisted to something ugly. *I am...not allowed.* Her gaze fell to the broken shrine. *An annoying presence lingers despite my best efforts.*

“I see,” Sakura replied. Something deep within her balked at the thought of giving Kaguya a peach. She knew it wouldn’t end well for her or anyone else. “And if I refuse?”

High-pitched, buzzing laughter filled Sakura’s head, nearly bringing her to her knees. *I will destroy all you love.*

Sakura glared up at Kaguya as she reached Sakura’s side of the pond. She was within reach. Sakura wrapped her fingers around her knives, lunging forward.

Kaguya’s eyes went wide as she dodged back. Apparently, she wasn’t expecting resistance to her demands. Sai’s gift nicked her arm, drawing forth spurts of gold ichor. Kaguya let free an unearthly shriek, the eye in her forehead focusing on Sakura.

*You dare!*

Sakura wasn’t given a chance to respond as Kaguya dove forward, knocking Sakura back against the trunk of the tree. Her hands clasped around Sakura’s neck, claws biting into the soft flesh there. Sakura flailed wildly as streams of blood pooled out from beneath Kaguya’s fingernails, soaking into Sakura’s shirt.

Sakura blinked through her tears, turning Sai’s knife in her hand and driving it into Kaguya’s side.

Kaguya hissed, but remained seated firmly over Sakura. *You will learn obedience,* she said idly, gaze landing above Sakura’s shoulder. Her smile widened, displaying her needle teeth once more. *Perhaps an example will sweeten your attitude.*

She released Sakura, drifting past her to where Yamato hung, unconscious and helpless to the whims of the entity.

Sakura heaved, bright spots filling her field of vision as she caught her breath. She stood shakily, looking to Kaguya.

She stood over Yamato, forehead pressed to his in a sick facsimile of Sakura’s gesture moments before. Her red eye was opened wide though the others were closed and Sakura saw something that appeared to be gold dust passing from Yamato’s nostrils and mouth to Kaguya’s open eye. With each second that passed, Yamato’s skin paled and slackened.

She was draining him.
Sakura cast her eyes around for something, anything she could do. The peaches beckoned her, beguiling and alluring. She inhaled deeply, filling her lungs with their scent. It filled her with energy and she scrambled forward, drawing the dull obsidian blade and driving it into one of the low hanging branches. She wouldn’t handle the peach itself, she couldn’t.

She feared what it would make her. And she knew well that it would change her.

Sakura was surprised when the dull blade cut into the bark. The branch parted from the tree easily, far easier than it should have. She hefted the branch, testing the weight of it. It was a good three feet long, with a single peach hanging near the far end. The branch was heavy and solid in her grasp and again Sakura looked at the dull blade, unsure of its power. How had it cut down the branch so quickly?

Hiruzen did say that Pompeii would provide...

The blood in Sakura’s veins sung as she handled the branch. It called to her, telling her to eat and be merry and to live. It would answer all of her questions and give her all she needed to accomplish happiness…

Except Yamato, a piece of her happiness, was in peril and nothing the peach offered was worth that.

“Hey!” Sakura called, voice husky and shredded from the damage done to her throat. Kaguya paused, turning to her. “I have what you want right here!”

Kaguya’s eyes lit with an infernal glee as she darted forward. Yamato slumped once more, though Sakura could see the rise and fall of his chest. He lived. No matter what happened from here, Yamato lived.

You’ve done it. Kaguya stopped before Sakura, gaze warring between reverence and revulsion as she regarded the peach. She didn’t even bother to look at Sakura.

“Everything you want,” Sakura said, repeating the promise of the peach. Kaguya’s eyes glittered and Sakura knew that the tree tempted her just the same. “Life everlasting.”

Kaguya reached for it, hands trembling. As her claws moved to encircle it in a gentle embrace, Sakura drove forward with all her might, aiming for the eye in the center of the woman’s forehead. The sharp tip of the branch caught the eye square-on, piercing through it and gliding into the woman’s skull with the gentlest, sickening pop.

Gold ichor splattered Sakura and the peach as Kaguya’s body went stiff.

No, she moaned, her presence within Sakura’s mind trailing and weakening. I can’t…how?

Sakura twisted the branch, shoving it further into Kaguya, tears tacky and streaking through the gold ichor coating her cheeks. Kaguya collapsed at the foot of the tree, the branch lodged deep within her skull. Sakura turned away from the body, retching. She lost the meagre contents of her stomach as she pressed herself against the tree. She clung to the trunk, trying to regain her strength.

The moment she could stand, Sakura moved around the body to Yamato. His color was returning and Sakura saw the bark that held him in place beginning to retreat. The tree itself was beginning to fade away from sight. She wedged the obsidian blade beneath particularly difficult patches, easing his body free from the tree.

In a matter of minutes, Yamato fell forward and she caught him, bringing them both to the ground.
She blinked at the ground, disoriented by its color. Hadn’t it been green? It was now coated in powdery white. She swept her fingers across the ground, picking up hot material.

“Snow isn’t hot,” she muttered, gaze crossing and going bleary.

The ash continued to fall across her and Yamato as Sakura laid him out and watched the movement of his chest as he breathed in and out.

She leaned over him, positioning her body beside his as her adrenaline gave out. She hoped that Kaguya was truly dead. If not... well, she wouldn’t be waking from this.

“You’ve...” announced a voice Sakura didn’t recognize. His voice went in and out of focus and Sakura knew Kaguya had left a lingering mark on her. She shifted slightly, still crouching over Yamato, frowning as a figure wearing battered and broken armor strode forward. She overestimated the turn and nearly fell, but hands were there to catch her. She looked up into unfamiliar dark eyes.

“Rest...well, thanks...Sakura.”

With that, Sakura fell forward into the forgiving folds of unconsciousness and knew no more.
History has been, is, and will forever be, a fickle thing. How will history remember the days of upheaval that trail out from the cortex of a single mistake? How will the readers of history interpret these events?

Ash continued to fall through Pompeii, warm like bursts of sunlight, and where they touched blight was no more. It touched their bodies and suddenly their armor was old, like it had been old for ages. Scratches and dents that had never stayed now stood out. The metal weighed heavy on his body, fitting poorly.

Beside him, he could hear his brother stripping and decided to follow suit, saying nothing. A small pile of discard armor grew at their feet, rusting away as soon as it lost contact with their body.

“Sakura!”

He looked up in time to see his brother making the mad dash through the trees to the desecrated shrine. Determined to follow close behind, he spared only a single glance over his shoulder for the boy made out of shadows that they had managed to save from a fate far worse. He would wake in his own time, free of blight or sickness. The whole of Pompeii would soon wake up in much the same way thanks to the ash blessing.

‘More than they deserve,’ he thought darkly.

He had been watching along with his brother for far too many months as each one passed with a little more of her smile, until Sakura was left with a pitiful fragment of her usual cheerfulness. They didn’t know what they did to her when they accused her, they had no idea how their accusation had cut deep enough to wound her psyche.

That had been what Kaguya wanted. When the ceremony to keep her sealed for another year failed that had been the beginning of it all. But, wonder of wonders, what had been impossible centuries ago, before record, before ancestors, before warnings, was now finally realized. An unkillable monstrosity was laid to rest.

Indra turned to follow his brother down the path, racing to catch up. The way was familiar, but where once upon a time there had been a neat clearing with a shrine and lake, now there stood a shattered alter and a twisted, heavy peach tree that loomed over a slowly draining pond. The healing waters were receding with no guarantee they would ever be seen again.

Ashura had already reached Sakura’s side and was calling out to her when Indra knelt down on her opposite side. He pulled her to him and stared down at her unfocused gaze, glassy from the ash and sweat clinging to her lashes.

She tried to say something but her voice didn’t make it past her lips.

“That’s enough, rest well. Thanks to you, Sakura, Pompeii is safe,” Indra said.
Her eyes slid completely out of focus and her eyelids fell all the way as the rest of her body sagged into his arms.

Ashura made a strangled noise deep in her throat and reached to tug at the scraps of shirt around her neck. She wore a collar of bruises, blooming into color with the promise of darkening later on. There was blood in places where her clothes ripped too, likely the result from being thrown around like a rag doll.

“How could she do this to her?” Ashura asked out loud, cataloging each injury and bruise. “It’s brutal.”

“The old gods typically are not less, and you should know better than to put such a thing past our grandmother,” Indra answered while folding Sakura closer to his body with care.

The sight of her made him shake in anger. Her back was bleeding in places from minor scratches in too many places. He could see bruises growing underneath the surface of her skin like far off galaxies drawing closer into view. Like his brother, he was more distraught than he remembered ever being when he saw the state their favorite person was in.

“She’ll recover, won’t she?” Ashura asked as he stood to follow his brother.

Indra looked to the water that were once a source of healing and frowned at how dead it now seemed. Ashura understood the look and leapt for what was left, scooping up some of the water into cupped hands to bring back to Sakura’s form. He washed her arms and back this way, but whatever magic had once existed in the water was null now.

“It’s not working,” Ashura panicked.

“That’s not the only thing we can do for her. Grab the other one, the companion, and take him with us.”

Ashura moved to grab Yamato and turn the man over to better haul up into a fireman’s carry.

“Where are we going?”

“Pompeii will provide a haven. Come, we should leave this place least grandmother’s blight linger in some ill way.”

Ashura grunted in understandment, shuffling the man on his shoulders until he became comfortable.

“I doubt there is anything left if we’re both here like this. Grandmother’s curse wouldn’t have lifted with anything less.”

Indra hummed in agreement, growing distracted by the cluster of ashflakes that lingered on her long lashes. He blew them away and wished he could do the same for the cuts and bruises making a collar on her neck. She had never seemed more frail or small.

The pair passed the scarred places of earth where they once made battle. They passed the sleeping body of the Nara boy who had dared raise a hand against their Sakura, and they passed several crumbling trees that seemed burned out from the inside. The edge of the forest soon came into view and the two brother made a beeline for it.

“Brother,” Ashura called. “Can you see it, can you tell now what Sakura is?”

Indra refused to blush. “Don’t be crude in such a situation. I wouldn’t dare pry after all she’s done to help us.”
Ashura huffed, less embarrassed by the request. “You have greater insight than I do, brother, and you were blessed with those eyes of yours. I through that you would be able to see what was hidden from you before after everything that’s happened.”

Indra hated how the temptation grew inside of him to peer through the veil of his blessed sight and see the unseen, if only that meant he could know Sakura greater. When they had first met he had distrusted her emphatically and tried repeatedly to devise her true nature. *Was she a forest sprite or nymph, was she something older, a foreign god from forgotten or desecrated lands?*

The boy she called Shikamaru was so easy to see through. He knew the Nara were Shades, masters of shadow and the great manipulators of darkness. Their offspring was no different. He could see the truth of many others who traveled too close to their perches.

The Senju were all fey, the Uchiha were all tengu, that silver haired one tied to the one named Obito was a golem. The redhead woodcutter was a Golem Warlock. The blond girl who called out to Sakura was a Swan Maiden. They were all so easy to see through. Even the Storm God Pein could be perceived with some effort. He had not encountered an individual he could not see through until…

Sakura.

“It doesn’t matter anymore that I can’t see what she is. She’s something far greater than you or I and what’s more, she’s the creature we owe our lives to. I’ll not ask or pry again. Should she wish to share that with us, it would be my greatest pleasure, but I dare not demand what I do not deserve.”

“You’re so old fashioned. You make it sound like I asked you to do something nasty,” Ashura chuckled dryly. “I just wanted to know her a little better.”

When Indra looked back he could see that his brother was more depressed than he sounded. Ashura tried to summon a brave front but walked with a weight that came more from his heart and less from the new, physical body.

“Ashura,” he softly called. The younger brother lifted his head only a fraction in response. “We will have plenty of days to get to know her better in our own ways with our own voices. Don’t despair. Pompeii will provide.”

Ashura blinked and straightened, looking at something past his brother’s shoulder. “Provide something like that?”

Both males looked as one as a structure shimmered into focus, here and then there. The brick exterior and ivy growing up the side made it look like it had always been there, always been around, but it rested in the middle of the field between the tree line and the town, far from any road or conventional footpath.

Indra saw the veins of magic running all throughout the structure and nodded, detecting nothing nefarious about it. The book that sat dead in her backpack was meant for the building, their magical signatures were the same.

“Come, it seems provisions have found us,” Indra said, holding her closer and mounting the first of the steps leading up to the library entrance.

The doors were already opening in their own for the brothers.
Hashirama had his arms folded into the sleeves of his outer robe where they wouldn’t be a distraction to those who knew him well enough to see how white his knuckles were with tension.

“Is that who I think it is?” Minato Namikaze asked stiffly. Beside him Kushina reached for his arm to hold onto as she drew her body closer. Her eyes were wide in a terrifying way.

“If you mean is that the body of Kaguya Otsutsuki who we have been bothering to seal away each year, then the answer is yes, that is who you think it is,” Hashirama’s wife Mito answered coolly. “Count yourself as one of the fortunate few who are so blessed as to walk away from this with your life in place. I have heard a rare few have been so lucky in ages past.”

“No shit, it was the reason we were keeping her sealed I thought,” Shikaku Nara huffed.

The father looked back over his shoulder at his son who sat apart from the group with his head in his hands. Shikamaru had refused to turn around after seeing the shadow play of the whole ordeal the first time. He hadn’t said anything when they called to him, and Shikaku was only mildly worried about what this would mean for his son later on. He was a father, after all. But Shikaku had faith that, eventually, Shikamaru would recover from whatever trauma he was currently dealing with. Now wasn’t the time to rush that sort of healing. The others could wait if they wanted anything more from his son.

“Shikaku,” Hashirama called out. “Show us the shadow play once more.”

Behind them all Shikamaru flinched and held himself tighter. It made Shikaku’s lips draw thin to do something he knew was hurting his son, but there was no choice. It was Hashirama, after all.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say. Back it up and get out of the way.”

He drew up his magic and hooked it to the natural shadows surrounding the area. Like fabric figures they rose up, forming the outlines of the characters who had run through the forest clearing no more than four hours ago. As long as it was within a day Shikaku would be able to make the shadows show him what happened.

The shadow figures stiffened and then all at once each began to move to their places and play out a scene they had seen several times already. He kept his magic flowing as one figure threw another and then gripped it tight. There was no sound and there was no color, but it was interesting how the brain filled in those details once the shapes and sizes made sense.

Kaguya dove forward, knocking Sakura back against the trunk of the tree. Her hands clasped around Sakura’s neck, claws biting into the soft flesh there. Sakura flailed wildly as streams of blood pooled out from beneath Kaguya’s fingernails, soaking into Sakura’s shirt. Sakura turned the knife in her hand and drove it into Kaguya’s side.

Naruto’s father gasped as if he could actually hear the wound being made.

“And here is where we think she drops Sakura to go to the figure in the tree,” Hashirama intones. He watches the shadow play like some great detective, internet on unraveling every mystery.

“We think it’s Yamato,” Shikaku supplied.

It was what his son told him he heard Sakura say before this whole fight happened. It made sense. Most people knew how devoted the copy was to the new doctor, so it wasn’t too hard to believe that she would be equally devoted.

“We think so, yes,” Hashirama grunted, eyes going dark.
They watched the climax of the fight as Kaguya’s shadow drifted down with a branch sticking out of her head, falling until the shadow lay atop the corpse of the woman they had already discovered. Her body was soaked with ichor that had already been witnessed on multiple accounts from trees cut open. Shikamaru had been seeing the gold ichor for months along with everyone else.

‘And you did nothing!’

“She gets up though, she’s able to do that much,” Minato supplied helpfully. As the words were out of his mouth Sakura’s shadow crumbled against Yamato and slips down, only to be scooped up by two new shadows who leave the area.

“The knights,” Hashirama grumbled. “Who are they?”

“The armor is old, whoever they were. The metal is disintegrating in our hands when we try to touch it, so there’s not a lot we can do to identify it,” Minato said before looking back over his shoulder at his silent wife. Her eyes were still wide and her hand was a vice on his arm.

“Are they a threat?” asked the eldest Senju. “What do we know about them other than they appear only at the end and spirit her off to...nowhere.”

They had followed the shadows until they climbed what seemed to be stairs into a void of space where shadow could not follow. The trail was impossible to track after that.

“They don’t seem to be a friend to Kaguya, if that is what you are worried about. They saved my son, even after he tried to stop Sakura. I don’t think they are figures we need to worry about right now. We-”

“But they took her,” Tobirama interjected, voice hard like his eyes as he stepped through the trees into the clearing. The group turned as one to greet him without words. It is clear the younger Senju has more to say. “They have Sakura right now. That’s more than enough reason to seek them out and track what we can of them. She was hurt.”

“She’s not a danger like we thought she was, we don’t have to do anything,” Hashirama replied. His voice was softer only for his brother.

Hours earlier Tobirama had awoken as fit and healthy as ever, barely remembering the sensation of sickness only to discover the branch of cherry blossom he cherished in a jar had withered away into white ash on the windowsill. Like everyone else who had fallen sick, there wasn’t even a trace of illness left in his body.

Hashirama had never seen his younger brother so desperate for something, and he hated how this new emotion was so painful to watch bloom. More than just desperation, Tobirama felt an overabundance of guilt towards Sakura, also a new emotion. It didn’t help that no one could tell Tobirama what had happened to the wrongly accused savior of Pompeii. Even if she did adore that abomination, Hashirama was willing to look past that all for the sake of his brother who was helpless to the blooming of his long still heart.

“We’ll find her. There aren’t a lot of places she could go in that sort of condition. With all the able bodies someone is bound to spot something,” Minato said.

Tobirama’s red eyes flashed as he growled. “We need to expedite the search. We have no idea what sort of wounds she may be suffering from after encountering such an ancient creature.”

“If she was able to stand up to Kaguya and hobble away I’m sure she’ll be fine-”
Tobirama slammed a fist into the side of a tree and Shikamaru shook, curling up into even a tighter ball.

“It’s not good enough that she’s fine. She need to be found!”

“And we will,” Hashirama interjected. “This is not something we will leave to others. You and I, brother, will seek her out together in our own ways. Who can deny our skills?”

“Meanwhile,” Mito interrupted sharply. The group turned to stare at the older red haired woman as one. Mito’s hand was raise to point to where Kaguya laid. “What should the people be told of this. Pompeii clamors for answers, even now. Some believe Sakura was killed that they are all now better and others don’t know what to think.”

Shikamaru was still shaking, but his nails dug deep into his scalp like an effort to try and keep him still. It was enough to make his father worry.

“We’ll put a stop to those rumors, we won’t let them go on like that,” Shikaku said, turning to look at Hashirama next. “They will believe you if you go out and tell them what we saw here.”

Hashirama looked from the youngest Nara to his father. “Yes, that is one way to do things, but please understand how sensitive the situation is. We have to be careful about what we tell the people. I don’t want to stir up unnecessary worry.”

“You want to put a spin on this?” Minato guessed.

“That makes it sound like something underhanded. I want to manage the most sensitive information. I am not a liar, you know that is not a Senju trait.” Hashirama tried out another polite smile reserved for fundraisers and campaign speeches. “I’m not here to spread information or cause a panic. Let me manage this message to the public.”

“Oh, is that what we’re doing now?”

The group minus Shikamaru turned to watch Tsunade step into the clearing. She wore all black and the diamond on her forehead pulsed with purple energy. Her hair was braided back like she was prepared for something a bit more strenuous than her usual routines.

“Tsunade,” Mito whispered, unable to raise her voice after all.

The blonde woman scanned the group lazily before her eyes set on Hashirama. “I should have known they would leave this in the hands of the best deceiver incapable of lying. What sort of spin were you planning, old man? What were you planning on leaving out?”

Hashirama swallowed. “The people don’t need to know it was Kaguya.”

“You mean they don’t need to know it was your fault all this happened in the first place. Instead of addressing the issue when you first noticed it, you played politician for the crowd and endangered us all. That brat has been bearing the burden of your mistakes all this time and you plan on denying her justice.”

Tsunade took a step into the clearing, disrupting the air with a crackle of her own magic. Shikaku noticed it a second too late, but her magic was already ingesting the shadows of the area and learning everything the shadow play had told them. Before he could stop it she was done.

“Tsunade, don’t be rash,” Hashirama warned.
“You’re smart to be wary, but I’m not the one you should be threatening with your big boy tone,” she mocked. She set a hand on her hip and tilted her chin up so she was staring down her nose at him.

Mito stepped up beside Hashirama and glared at the other witch. “Don’t do something you’ll regret. Your reputation in Pompeii is-”

“I don’t give two shits about something like that,” Tsunade hissed angrily, cutting the older woman off. “And maybe if you lot learned a bit from me we wouldn’t be in this mess, but we are and there’s nothing we can do to go back in time to change it.”

“People don’t need to know,” Hashirama tried again.

“People are learning it as we speak. You owe this much to her and to everyone else. All the people you’ve deceived are entitled this truth.” She bared her teeth.

Hashirama breathed deeply. “Don’t do anything you’ll regret later, witch. You’ve been allowed to wander so freely thanks to good grace.”

“You want to try threatening me you should try using some threats that mean something. You’re not as powerful as you think you are, old man, and the winds of change are blowing.” She waved her hand at the dead body of Kaguya. “And we’re rooting out the rot where we find it, so make sure you’re not a cancer we need to cut out before you go threatening others of the same.”

“Do you know where she is?”

Tsunade leaned back to look over at Tobirama and frowned. The aggression that ran through Hashirama like a taut bowstring was unrecognizable in Tobirama. The younger brother was agitated, but in a very different way.

“What does that matter to you?” She narrowed her eyes at him and there was a spark of purple there to match the glow of her diamond. “It was your little branch and bud that made this whole fiasco possible, so don’t think I’ll tell you only for you to try and paint yourself into a victim. You don’t get to do that after blaming and doubting her.”

“She’s hurt. All that can come later, but she left this area heavily wounded and was carried off by two figures. Do you know who they were or where she might be now?”

“I doubt she’s in anymore danger.”

“She’s hurt. Someone should make sure she’s taken care of!” Tobirama exclaimed.

Tsunade huffed loudly and shifted to fold her arms across her chest. “Don’t think you’re the only one capable of such a thing. Without you, there are still plenty of individuals who are willing to care for and cater to her needs. She may be a bit of an idiot and an airhead about some things, but there are too many rejects hungry for affection to not break themselves at her feet for another taste of her mercies. I won’t expect an illustrious Senju to understand this, but you’ve degraded and cast too many into the darkness in your hubris. If you underestimate Sakura that’s your fault, but she is far more loved than you could understand with your limited emotions.”

“There is no need for insults here,” Hashirama interjected. He took a step forward to put himself in between Tsunade and his younger brother. He pulled himself up with all the authority he had left in him and narrowed his eyes at her. “You can go and tell whoever you like what you saw here. It doesn’t make a difference or not. This won’t matter in the long run the way you think it will.”
“Maybe that’s what you believe, but Pompeii is tired of putting up with a functioning cancer in its body, and the time for surgery is now. Maybe you’ll survive the cull, but don’t think things aren’t changing around here.”

Tsunade lowered her head and a moment later the rest of her body folded into a space between here and there, and winked out of existence.

“I’m sorry, but she stole my shadow play and-” Shikaku tried to say but stopped when he saw Hashirama’s hand.

“That’s enough for now. We need to draft a narrative for the Uchiha before their damn birds reach this place. She can tell whoever she wants to, it’s all just shadows in the end. It’s not enough to do what she hopes.”

“Still….” Shikaku looked back at his son. “This matter is far from settled.”

“Agreed,” Hashirama said before turning to face the corpse and raising a single hand under his chin. Root work began to grow up around the body at his beck and call. “For now, we must deal with this body. Someone can say it burned up at the touch later on. Stand back while I cage it for later.”

Sakura felt the hand at her throat and choked on a breath before her eyes shot open. The trees were gone and the forest wasn’t a forest anymore, but a long bedroom with old fashioned wallpaper and victorian molding.

She felt movement at her bedside and turned, facing it only to see the face from before—the one that had been there when she slipped away.

Mari!

She tried to say his name but all she could feel was the vibration of her throat. There was a sound somewhere but it wasn’t close. She tried again, tried to call out to him, to ask him what had happened, to as where was she, but her voice was so far away, trapped someplace she couldn’t hear but yet still felt.

She remembered her ears ringing like there were nails being hammered into them and reached up to feel her ears, not knowing what else to expect. She scraped at her ears and felt the touch, but there was no sound, even when she tried to claw her ears open there was no sound. She couldn’t hear anything!

The knight with dark hair and darker eyes reached for her hands and pulled them away from her ears before she could scratch them raw. He held her hands together in one of his own and she felt his other knuckle brush the side of her face, where tears stained her skin.

She couldn’t hear it, but she could read his lips well enough to know what he said. “Shhh, don’t cry. It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.”

“I can’t hear anything,” Sakura said, not knowing if she spoke or screamed the words. She made them in her mouth like she knew how to do, but she had no idea if he understood her or not.

His eyes softened and the knuckles under her tears brushed across her ear before going back to her face, where more tears were starting to flow. Slowly, he inclined his head until their foreheads were touching and then he closed his eyes.
There was a presence in her mind and she pushed back at first before the warmth of it made her relent and allow it access. When she opened her eyes she could still feel the presence someone inside of her.

This time, when he moved her mouth, she heard him.

“I’m sharing my ability to hear with you. Now you hear what I hear. I’ve only done this for one sense. Are you still able to see and feel and taste without issue?”

Sakura swallowed and then weakly nodded. “I-I think so. Who-Mari, it’s you, isn’t it?”

A soft secret sort of smile melted on his face. “Yes, that’s me, but I am also called Indra. You called my brother after the daffodils but his name is Ashura. We were the knights you were so kind to.”

Sakura felt a new thrill of joy upon seeing one of the two knight brothers in the flesh before her, finally out of armor. “It’s so good to see you, but I still have so many questions. What happened?”

“You saved all of us.”

Sakura laughed and sagged forward a bit. “No, really, what happened, because I don’t remember much of it.” But the images came back and she had to swallow when she remembered the things that made her retch the first time. She remembered killing Kaguya and then…

“Yamato! Sai, are they alright?” Sakura asked suddenly, a new fear blooming in her heart.

“Annoying so, both companions you’ve mentioned are alive and well enough to bother us constantly about your status,” Indra grumbled. “Both are up and walking around the library least the drag us into further trouble with the head librarian here.”

“Library?” Sakura looked around her, searching for a clue that would tell her exactly where she was. “I didn’t know there were bedrooms this nice here.”

When they dragged Sai into the library, leaking from his wounds, they had deposited him on the nearest couch and Sakura hadn’t thought to go exploring further than that. But the Library was odd and mysterious and she couldn’t believe that if it wanted to, it couldn’t just grow an additional room to provide what was needed.

Sakura braced with the heels of her hand and tried to sit up but gasped at the pain stretching across her abdomen and back. With a whimper she fell back into the blankets, cradled by Indra who was too fast to not be attentive to her pain. She looked down and saw her sleeping pajamas were clean, but thin enough to make out the bandages through. She pulled the hem of her shirt up and winced at the parts that weren't bandaged.

“It looks so ugly,” she whined, forcing herself to laugh as she dropped the hem and looked away from all the marks marring her body. Scrapes and scratches and bruises made her into something hard to look at.

“You are more than your scars, and I could never see you as anything less than radiant.” When he looked up at her the black color of his eyes was almost red, like desert bloodstone.

She felt like he was seeing into her when he stared at her so intently. She had to blush. “I-I’m nothing so special, but I’m glad you all are safe. How long have I been recovering for?”

“A couple of days. Since we brought you to this place most of the people in town have recovered. No one is still suffering from Kaguya’s curse.”
Sakura sagged in relief. “Then Ino and Naruto and all the others are safe. That’s all that matters. I was afraid nothing had changed while I slept.”

“When Ashura was on watch yesterday you started to wake up but fell back asleep again. You’ve been restless all day and I’m afraid it might be because of the pain. I’m sorry we were not able to do more this time.”

Sakura touched her ear and grimaced. “Is this… permanent?”

He swallowed, looking lost. “I’m sorry, but it’s beyond me. I am no doctor.”

Sakura snorted at his words, unable to help herself. “Right, no, I’m sorry. That’s my job. I’ll have to ask Shizune to give me a check up. If it was a normal accident I would say there’s a chance my hearing comes back, but I still don’t understand completely what she did to me. She was in my head.”

“But you did what no one else could. Despite everything you were triumphant. These scars will heal at least,” he said, brushing his knuckles across the bandages around her neck.

“My friends and family are safe, that’s all that matters. It’d be nice if my hearing came back, but I’d rather it be like this than how it was before.” Sakura closed her eyes and let her head fall back into the pillows.

“Ashura has been waiting for you to wake. I feel selfish, monopolizing your time like this. Are you well enough to speak with him or should I leave you to rest some more?” Indra asked.

She remembered the cheerful knight that reminded her so much of Naruto, waving wildly to her while darkness rolled behind his blade at the end of her journey. Daffodil.

“Please, if he’s here, I want to see him,” Sakura said, chest going light at the thought.

Ashura smiled, squeezing her hand in reassurance or maybe thanks. She heard everything he heard as he stood from his seat and exited through the door. She heard him call out, she heard what he heard, ‘Is she-?’ ‘Yeah, and she’s asking for you.’ She even heard the hurried footsteps on hardwood floors.

When the door banged open she turned her head across the pillows to see the other of the two brothers standing there, eyes wide and watery, hair a ruffled mess behind a simple cloth headband. The smile that spread across her lips was so easy and that only made his tears come faster.

“Sa-ku-raaaa!” he cried, dashing over to drop down loudly beside her bed and drape his arms across her form. She hadn’t meant to but she grunted at the touch and he flinched in reaction.

“Imbecile,” Indra hissed, smacking Ashura upside his head. “She’s still hurt. Don’t be such an oaf with her.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Sakura laughed. “I’m not that hurt, you just surprised me a little. Ah, but it’s so good to finally see you in the flesh, Daffodil. How are you?”

Ashura’s face colored as his eyes watered even more. He tried to breath it out and steady himself but it came out sounding more like a choke. He melted at her bedside and weakly reached for her hand like it was made of glass. “I was so-o-o-oh sc-scared Sakura. You were so small and still. I was so scared that I wouldn’t be able to speak to you like this. I would have traded being a stupid empty suit of armor if I knew what would happen. I’m so sorry you’re hurt!”
Sakura laughed, squeezing his hand back in reassurance. “Don’t think about it like that. It’s not like you giving up what you are now would do me any good. And really, there are worse things than scars. I’ll heal, that’s no big deal, but what about you? You have a body now, that has to be weird.”

Ashura bent down and kissed her fingers and then pulled back to laugh when she flustered at the touch. “Yeah, it is nice having a body again. I had forgotten what it felt like and what I was missing out on.”

Sakura couldn’t help it, but she felt compelled to flick his forehead, so she pulled out of his hold and did just that. He reacted way too dramatically, falling backwards in a way that made her laugh.

“Sakura?”

She heard the voice and it was like a knife in her heart because it was the most lovely sound, only for it to be something she might never hear again.

Yamato appeared in the doorway, looking out of breath with a pale Sai trailing in behind him. Further back in the hallway there was the top of Shizune’s head and maybe even Sarutobi’s.

Yamato didn’t wait for her to say anything, but dashed to the opposite side of her bed and fell atop her like a feather, slowing just enough to be soft enough to do no damage.

“Stupid girl,” she felt him mutter into her shoulder. That area was growing damp and she didn’t dare point that out, already knowing the reason for his tears. “What a stupid, stupid girl. What were you thinking?”

Sakura looked up and saw Sai lean against the foot of her bed, looking happy but tired. He was doing so much better than he had been when she last left him.

“I was thinking about making sure my family stayed safe. I wasn’t going to let her take any of you away from me, duh,” Sakura huffed with a roll of her eyes like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Really, Yamato, what do you take me for?”

“I’m sorry,” Yamato gasped, pulling away. She hadn’t noticed it until just then, but his hair was just past his jaw line now, long and healthy. Stands of it stuck to his cheeks where the tear trails stood out.

“Don’t be,” she tried to say.

“I’m sorry she did this to you. It’s not fair, and it’s because of me. That was the whole reason you were there in the first place. You would have been fine if I hadn’t been a distraction-a weakness for you.”

“If that’s how you want to go about labeling yourself, then fine. It’s a weakness I gladly accept.”

“No,” she cut him off with a single finger raised. “Not your turn to talk. Listen to me first. I’m not invincible and I might not be the baddest bitch you see in town, but we all have a weakness or two, so I’d be proud if my weakness was my precious people. And honestly, hon, how many people are so lucky to have their weakness also be their strength? I would have gone there on my own, anyway. Don’t think anything was your fault.” He looked away and when she saw his jaw shiver she reached to hold it and pull his face back towards her. “Promise.”

“You were almost killed.” He still shook in small ways as he forced himself to speak. “You don’t
I saved my family,” she answered without hesitation.

Yamato sagged into her side, burying his face in the covers around her hips. When his shoulders shook she reached out to scratch her fingers down his spine and up again, calming him back down.

Across from Yamato, Ashura glared lightly and huffed loudly. “I was also really scared for you Sakura.” Ashura scooted closer to the opposite side of Sakura and leaned in a little. “Never been more scared in my life.”

Sakura hummed, seeing through his words straight to his true intentions. “I’m sorry I scared you.” She reached out and ran a hand through his wild hair, scraping his skull with her nails just enough to cause a pleasant tingle.

“Are we going to have to put up with these new intruders?” Sai asked blandly, fake smile slipping into place as he nodded his head at Indra.

“Seeing as how we are the only fully healed, capable bodies in this building, It should be more like us putting up with you,” Indra shot back.

“That might be a little hard, since we’re already maxed out on spaces in our family and you would just be a nuisance. You already have a sibling, so be content, flower person. Find your own place to crash.”

“We did,” Ashura huffed from beside Sakura. “The library likes us just fine. If you don’t approve pack your own bags.”

“Now now,” Sarutobi cut in, sliding past Shizune and Indra to enter the room with his hands up. “There is plenty of room here for all of you as long as you need it. You were all welcomed for a reason and we don’t have to be picky.” He turned his smile off and instead looked to Sakura, frowning slightly at the bandages he could see. “Speaking of welcoming, there are two others just outside who are debating coming in. Should I go out to welcome them in or leave them alone?”

“What, who are they? I’m fine but I don’t know if I’m ready to defend myself to people just yet,” Sakura answered. She remembered too well what it looked like when people made an effigy of her to burn in the streets.

“That’s alright, these two are fine,” Shizune cut in. She waved to Sakura before disappearing to open the front door and do what Sarutobi suggested.

“How are you feeling my dear?” Sarutobi asked, looking back at Sakura.

“I’ll feel better in a few days. What is it they say after a crash. It hurts worse later on, right? Ah, I think that’s where I’m at right now.”

Sarutobi chuckled at her good humor and easy smile. “Oh, I’m not sure what they say about things like that, my dear. You’re the doctor, after all.”

Outside there were footsteps and the room seemed to widen as two different blond, blue eyed people poked their heads into her room.

Sakura felt dizzy at once.
“Ino, Naruto! You’re alright!” she cried, nearly getting out of bed only to wince and fall back down, unable to do that much.

The cried her name as one and plowed through the other individuals in the room to get to her bed and collapse at her side. Sakura hugged them as well as she could and then paused them away to look them over for signs of sickness, but aside from some weight loss they were perfectly healthy and bright.

“Quit worrying about us,” Ino cried through her thick tears. “You’re the one stuck in a bed now, you dummy.”

“No one would tell me what happened to you when I woke up. I thought something terrible had happened and you left or something, and I still don’t get it cause the old man ain’t talking, but I didn’t think it would be like this,” Naruto babbled, freaking out at the sight of all her bruises.

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” Sakura sighed.

Between the group of them, minus Indra who was content to let Ashura speak for him, the group went over the events pertaining to the Pompeii Plague caused by Kaguya, starting with the botched binding ceremony/ritual and going to the final confrontation. Naruto was oddly quiet when Yamato, Sai, and Ino recounted the details of how so much of the town turned on her and blamed Sakura for the sickness...including the entirety of Naruto’s family.

“People are still looking for you,” Ino added at the end.

“We were too, but we didn’t know where to start because the clinic is a mess, like it’s gone-gone.” Naruto made a cutting motion with his hand across his neck.

“We didn’t have a lot of leads to go on when we found this place. I’ve never been here before but Shizune was at the door and it was our best shot so that’s how we got here and...yeah, that’s the story,” Ino added.

“Looking for her? Who exactly is looking for Sakura?” Yamato asked, tone dark. Sakura didn’t miss the way the other boys in the room tensed, ready to go if the need arose.

“Lots of people...most everyone actually. Tsunade stole a shadow play and has been broadcasting it non stop in all the shadow places, replaying the showdown with illusionary magic to add color and textile. Now everyone knows what happened and only a few wacko hold outs still believe it was all a trick on your part,” said Ino.

Sakura meant to ask something more but the room around them shivered and Sakura felt queasy all of a sudden.

“What’s that?” Naruto asked, panicking.

Sarutobi cursed. “Someone has managed to enter the library uninvited.”

“That’s possible?” Shizune hollered, bracing against the wall.

“No, not unless they managed to follow behind someone else who was invited....” Sarutobi’s eyes and word trailed to Ino and Naruto and the whole room tensed at the implications.

The library had revealed itself to Naruto and Ino, allowing them to enter, but the magic that hid it between the here and there didn’t matter if someone was already on the stairs outside with one foot in the door.
Sarutobi turned on his heel, ready to expel the intruder but stopped short when he saw who it was in
the doorway.

“I don’t think you should be here,” the old man intoned, drawing himself up as best as he could.

“No, I’m pretty sure this is exactly where I need to be.”

Chapter End Notes

That was huge and I'm so dang tired, but also really happy with how this turned out. More friends for Sakura and maybe some more trouble with the council? Are they shifty or what? Who knows.

Happy Valentines' Day! Hope you're all having a good one!
 Alright friends, this is the final chapter of the arc. Pompeii will return in a few months, after Vesper and I have had a chance to catch our breaths. Thank you so much for sticking it out thus far, we really love getting to share the world of Pompeii with you all. We hope you’ve enjoyed the journey thus far and cannot wait to share more with you in the future!

Tobirama Senju walked through the doorway.

Everyone went on alert, shifting their bodies between Sakura and the interloper. Their backs tensed and, though she couldn’t see their expressions, Sakura knew they were hungry for battle.

“Stand down,” Sakura said, forcing herself into an upright position. She held back a whimper as she swung her legs off the bed, entire body protesting. “Stop.”

All eyes turned her way, shadowed with worry and affection.

Naruto was the first to relax, moving to Sakura’s side to fuss over her. She let him, hands fisted in the sheets to keep her arms from shaking. Her feet touched the floor, but she didn’t dare stand, not yet.

“Why are you here, Tobirama?” she asked, fighting to keep her voice even.

Tobirama took a half step forward, contenance softening. “I am here for you.”

“You can’t have her,” Yamato replied, face distorted with anger. “She is not going anywhere against her will.”

Tobirama’s eyes cut Yamato’s way, a sneer curling his lips. “That is not why I am here. I came to verify her health.”

“I’m fine,” Sakura said, hoping to interrupt the obvious animosity.

“Who are you?” Ashura asked, sensing Sakura’s anxiety.

“I am Tobirama Senju,” he replied, looking Ashura over in assessment. His lips tugged down. “Who are you?”

“We are the Founders of Pompeii,” Indra said, taking vindictive delight in the way Tobirama’s jaw tightened with surprise. “It is apparent you are unwelcome here; the very essence of Pompeii fights against your presence.”

“Yet I am here,” Tobirama said, ignoring the way Pompeii’s barrier buffeted him. He had taken advantage of a loophole, as was the nature of his ilk, yet Pompeii still tried to punish him. He
returned his attention to Sakura. “I wish to speak with you.” He glanced at the eavesdroppers. “Alone.”

Yamato stiffened. “No. There is no chance in hell that I’ll leave you alone with—”

“Yes, Yamato,” Sakura said, reaching out and grasping his hand. “It is alright.” She waited until Yamato looked at her. “I am not afraid.”

Ino, catching Sakura’s look, poked Naruto and, with his assistance, began wrangling the others out of the room. It was akin to herding cats, but Ino was more than skilled enough to get them moving.

As Yamato crossed Tobirama’s path, he leaned in and whispered, “Do anything, anything, to make Sakura feel uncomfortable and your relatives will not find your body.” His eyes were cold and remote. “I will devour you and use you as fertilizer.”

Tobirama stared back at him blandly, unimpressed. Truthfully, he was more concerned with Sakura, as she looked small and lost among the rich textiles that made up her bedding. He looked at Hiruzen, still standing vigilant to Sakura’s side.

“Tread lightly, Tobirama,” he said, mouth firm. Sakura, now outside the reach of Indra’s magic, struggled to hear him. She could, but just barely. “Pompeii does not take kindly to threats, especially within such hallowed halls as this.”

Tobirama waited until Hiruzen left the room before striding closer to Sakura. She struggled to her feet, fighting back a grimace at the pain. She wobbled and Tobirama reached for her, only for her to throw her arms up in defense.

“Don’t,” she barked, finding her balance.

A strange throbbing heat took root in Tobirama’s chest at her denial of him and his help, searing at the flesh and bone there. He didn’t recognize it, but he knew he despised the sensation.

Sakura took a deep breath, movements jagged and protesting against her bruised rib cage. “What do you want, Tobirama?”

He bit his tongue to keep his instinctive response from spilling forth. From her crossed arms and furrowed brows, Tobirama doubted she would appreciate “You,” as an answer. “I came to make amends,” he said.

Sakura cocked a brow at him when he fell silent. “Go on then,” she said. “Stating your intention to do so does not count as apologizing.”

Tobirama flexed his fingers, wondering why he was so damn anxious. Her unreadable expression didn’t help his nerves. “Sakura, I apologize for the way we as a clan and I in particular treated you in these past few months. It was wrong for us to behave so poorly on such circumstantial evidence.” He swallowed, eyes darting away from her face. “You must understand, the being known as Kaguya was attempting to malign you, cast doubts upon your character.”

“I know that,” Sakura said, eyes a forest blaze as she looked up at him. “I know that better than any of you.”

“Then you understand why we acted the way we did; we were desperate for answers in the face of this plague.” Tobirama’s voice picked up as he warmed to the topic. “The Uchiha were useless and no one could provide answers. Everything led back to you. It appeared that you catalyzed these events.”
“From what I understand,” Sakura said softly, “you were the one who started this.” Tobirama froze, an absolute, alien stillness to his body. “You broke tradition, you and Sasori both.” Her face twisted. “You bent the rules and Kaguya seeped through the ensuing cracks.”

“How were we to know?” Tobirama asked, demanded really. “How were we to believe a fanciful fairy tale, one that seemed to have no grounding in reality?”

Sakura laughed, a bitter sound laced with the hoarseness lingering from her encounter with Kaguya. “You believed my involvement in the mess quickly enough. We live in a world of fanciful fairy tales; why on earth would you even take a chance? You are Fey; you know the consequences of loopholes! Why would you take part of the Genesis Tree?”

“It reminded me of you,” he said. “Its beauty, the transient, ethereal quality to the Tree; it was a personification of you.”

“So you took it,” Sakura said, turning away from him as she folded in on herself. “You took and Kaguya was freed.” She fell silent for a long moment, gaze distant. Finally she shuddered, taking painstaking steps to move away from him. “Please leave.”

Pompeii’s barriers lashed out at him, attempting to wrest him away from her, attempting to fulfill her wishes. Tobirama’s eyes narrowed as he buckled down, exerting his strength in full. His visage took on his true form: alien eyes, heightening markings, and heavy horns. It was enough to keep him there, staring at Sakura’s back as she moved away from him.

“I love you!” Tobirama said, desperation fueling his words. “I love you damn it.”

Sakura stopped and turned to him. There was something in her eyes, some emotion Tobirama had never experienced before, but seen expressed by others.

Pity.

“You do not love me,” Sakura said as she hobbled back until she stood before him. She took in the full effect of his appearance, the glory and terror that was the Sengu scion and did not waver. “Tobirama, you do not love me.”

“Yes I do,” he replied, distantly aware that he sounded like a recalcitrant child. “You have awakened me to the sometimes painful and messy experience of emotions. Before you I felt nothing, was nothing but a hollowed out shell. You’ve inspired me to all new heights and horrors.”

“Tobirama, what you’re experiencing isn’t love. Lust, excitement, or even fondness maybe, but it is not love,” Sakura said. She reached up, stopping just short of touching his face. Tobirama leaned into it, eyes shutting as her fingers touched his skin. “Love is...love is kind and giving and built upon trust. You chose to take and take and take- ” Her voice cracked but she carried on, “You did not trust me in the face of lies, even as others did. You don’t know me, Tobirama, not really. If you did, you would have trusted me. Have we ever spoken plainly with each other?

“What you are feeling is selfish and scorching and it has burned me in ways you cannot begin to imagine. Love, true love, is selfless, requires sacrifice--” Sakura felt phantom cold fingers squeezing down on her windpipe again. “When you love someone, you put them before yourself.”

Tobirama’s gaze shuttered. He felt small in the face of her passionate speech. “So where does my failure leave us?”

“I don’t know,” Sakura replied frankly and openly. “As things stand, I cannot forgive you. It’s all too fresh.” She kept her eyes open against the violent images behind her eyelids. “I need space to heal.”
Tobirama raised his hand to cover hers against his cheek, pressing it close for but a moment. Then, for the first time in his living memory, he submitted. He bowed beneath the will of Pompeii and Sakura, forcefully removed from the library.

Something painful and sharp was lodged in his chest, making it hard to move. He pressed his hand, still warm with Sakura’s touch, against his chest.

Was this what heartbreak felt like?

Sakura took a seat upon the tatami mat, holding Sai’s hand as she moved to kneel. She knew her hosts valued propriety and she’d be damned if she gave them reason to question her. Sakura ignored the flurry of motion, aborted attempts to assist no doubt, from her hosts as she situated herself.

“How are you, Sakura?” Madara asked, wings folded behind his back.

All of the Uchiha had their wings out and Sakura wasn’t sure if it boded well or ill for her.

“Considering that it is a struggle to sit down,” Sakura said, eyes cast downward in a demure fashion, “I’d say I’m in rather poor health.”

Shisui snickered, though it was swiftly cut off with Itachi’s elbow in his gut.

“What brings you and your…” Madara’s gaze went beyond Sakura’s shoulders, to Yamato, Sai, and the Otsutsuki brothers, “associates here?”

“I am here because I have a deal I would like to make.”

Izuna’s eyes lit with interest and he leaned forward. “A deal?”

“Yes,” Sakura said. “As I’m sure you know, I have taken up residence in the Library these past few weeks since Kaguya’s attack. We are searching out a permanent residence. Some transients have taken up within the abandoned logging mill. After consulting the charters kept within the Library, I found out that the land is part of your property.”

“And you want it?” Madara said.

Sakura smiled. “Yes I do. I know you don’t use the land for anything. It goes to waste as it is.”

“It is still Uchiha property--”

“You may have it,” Izuna interrupted, directing a venomous stare at his brother. “It is the least of what we owe you in light of our clan’s actions.”

Sakura ducked her head to him in acknowledgement. “I thank you for the offer, Izuna. However, I have learned that nothing is given freely in Pompeii. I will pay the property price in full.”

She motioned to Indra and Ashura. They sidled forward, lifting forth an ancient chest. Sakura hid a smile as the wings of the Uchiha flare a bit in fascination.

They placed the chest before Madara and moved back into place behind Sakura, though not before Ashura winked at her.

As Madara popped the lid of the chest, Sakura said, “You see before you a collection of magic items harvested from within a living volcano, specifically the Pompeii volcano.” She placed a scroll before her. “This is a meticulous list of all of the items within the chest and their specific properties.”
“You’d willingly part with such bounty?” Madara asked, exploring the contents of the chest. “These are worth far more than land.”

Sakura looked to Ashura and Indra, frowning slightly. They’d underplayed the value of the items. “It is of little use to us,” Ashura said, face solemn. “They are relics of the past; we look toward forming a stable future. The land will serve that purpose.”

“Do we have a deal?” Sakura asked.

Madara exchanged looks with his family members before nodding. “We do indeed. If you will remain here, we will gather the deed to the land and draft up an agreement.”

“We’ve drafted one ourselves,” Sakura said, passing a stack of papers to Madara. “Please, look it over and we can discuss any amendments that need to be made.”

Madara’s smile widened. “You came prepared.”

“Of course,” Sakura said, looking over each of the family members. Itachi and Sasuke did not meet her gaze, though Obito stared at her with a deep curiosity in his eye. “I will not be swindled in any deals I make from here on.”

Madara’s smile fell away as he looked at her for a long moment. “You’re learning the game,” he said, rising gracefully to his feet. The rest of his clan stands as well. “If you would wait here, we will gather the necessary materials. Kakashi will bring you tea as you wait.” Madara strode out of the room, effectively ending the conversation.

Itachi seemed like he wanted to say something, but a quelling look from Izuna had him following Madara out the door.

Izuna waited until everyone else left before moving to sit before Sakura. He bowed his head to her and spoke, “I apologize for the actions of my clan. They’ve been severely reprimanded for their actions.” His gaze was stormy and Sakura knew that the consequences for his relatives were high. “They will not bother you in the future.”

“Thank you, Izuna,” Sakura said, reaching out and patting Izuna’s hand. “I appreciate your kindness.”

“Anything you need,” Izuna said, turning his hand over so he could grasp Sakura’s. “I will be happy to provide.”

“I thank you but that is not necessary. I would appreciate perhaps having a regular tea time again,” Sakura said. “I have missed your company.”

Izuna’s responding smile was luminous. “Of course. Let me know when you get settled in your new home; I have some plans for new floral arrangements.”

Sakura nodded, watching as Izuna left.

“I do not trust him,” Sai said.

“You don’t trust anyone,” Sakura replied, casting him an affectionate smile. “Izuna is a good friend and never doubted my innocence. I trust him.”

Sai hummed, but thankfully remained silent as Kakashi entered the room, laden down with a tray of tea and biscuits. He kneeled before Sakura and set about pouring the tea, keeping his gaze upon his
Sakura, remembering their last encounter, took the cup from him with a word of thanks, inhaling the sweet spiciness of the tea. “How are you, Kakashi?”

He huffed a laugh. “How are you?” he asked, looking up at her. “You look like death warmed over.”

“I didn’t heed your advice about the forest,” Sakura said.

“From what I understand, that was a smart decision on your part,” Kakashi replied, serving tea to the others. “You overcame the forest entity. You shouldn’t be afraid of the forest, it should fear you.”

Sakura thought back to the battle, to the way her neck still throbbed with mottled bruises. Her hearing would never be the same. But did she fear the forest? No. “Perhaps,” she said. She met his eyes, read the keenness, the awareness that hadn’t been there during her confrontation with Obito. “Kakashi, why do you stay?”

His expression reminded her of Yamato’s, of Sai’s, from so long ago: lost and adrift. “I cannot.”

“You are always welcome within my home,” Sakura said, keeping her voice soft. She felt the brush of Ashura and Indra’s magics and knew they would not be overheard. “The invitation is indefinite.”

Kakashi looked stunned for but a moment, before his countenance closed off, becoming remote. It was enough forewarning for Sakura as the Uchiha reentered the room, taking their seats. Kakashi slunk into the shadows, disappearing within the recesses of the manor.

Sakura met Madara’s gaze evenly. “Shall we continue?”

Tsunade whistled as they crested the hill and the building came into sight. “You have fine taste, girl.”

Sakura laughed as she pulled up beside the building, parking the car. Shizune was generously lending the vehicle to Sakura until her finances were in enough order for her to purchase a car of her own. “You’ll have to let Sai know, he’s the one who designed it.”

The building, done in a bright art nouveau style, was still in the process of being built, honed by the will of Yamato. Thus far, it reminded Sakura a bit of an upscale apartment complex or one of the hotels she’d seen in downtown New York.

“You’re sitting pretty,” Tsunade said as they moved toward the building. “How are you affording this?”

“Yamato is responsible for the construction of the building and Sai for the design. Ashura and Indra have funded a good portion of the expenses with goods preserved from the time of the Founders,” Sakura explained, leading Tsunade through the garden. She smiled fondly at the flourishing marigolds, a reminder of her knights. The daffodils were sprouting but not yet in bloom. “I also have a nest egg of funds that I can and have tapped into.”

Tsunade’s eyes brightened with interest. “Items from the Founding, you say? My coven may be interested in purchasing some.”

“Of course,” Sakura said, inclining her head. She didn’t bother trying to offer any as a gift; she knew Tsunade would not take it. However, Sakura knew well how much she owed Tsunade and her steadfast dedication to exposing the truth. She would make sure that the bartering skewed in
Tsunade’s favor. “Indra and Ashura would be happy to meet with you.”

Tsunade glanced askance at Sakura. “I’m certain that we could make a deal that involves some hearing implements. Magically enhanced, of course.”

Sakura stiffened. “I’m fine.”

“You are not,” Tsunade rebutted. “I may be a witch, but I am a healer first and foremost. I can sense the lasting damage done to your ears. I’ve also noticed that you keep looking to my lips as I speak. You are having a difficult time hearing, aren’t you?”

Sakura flushed, dropping her eyes from Tsunade’s mouth. “We’ve gotten it worked out,” she said, thinking of Indra and Ashura’s magic. The damage wrought by Kaguya’s onslaught, combined with the scars from Dosu’s attack, had left her in worse condition than she expected. The magic helped, but there was only so much it could do. “I’m navigating.”

“What you have is a makeshift solution at best,” Tsunade said, blunt and direct as always. She was used to recalcitrant patients and she refused to let the matter settle. “I can craft hearing aids for you, combining both science and magic in the best possible fashion. You will not have to rely on others for assistance.”

Sakura nodded. “I will think on it.”

Tsunade suddenly stopped short, a look of consternation crossing her face. “You have a barrier up.” She closed her eyes, concentrating. A series of red sparks flashed around her body. “It’s strong,” she said. “Multiple power sources, smart choice. Requires a verbal invitation and a physical one of some sort.” She opened her eyes and stared at Sakura expectantly. “Well?”

“Tsunade, you are welcomed to our home and hearth,” Sakura intoned, voice backed by ancient magic. It washed over Tsunade like a gentle rain as Sakura withdrew a nub of charcoal. She pressed up onto her toes, sketching a cradle-shaped symbol on Tsunade’s forehead. “I invoke the rune odal and accept you upon my estate.”

A shivery sensation traced up Tsunade’s spine and she pressed forward, moving into Sakura’s territory. They smiled briefly at each other and Sakura was almost sure that there was something fond in Tsunade’s gaze, but the moment passed too quickly to be sure.

Sakura led Tsunade up to the entrance of her new home, keying into it. She guided Tsunade through the foyer into the dining area, where the other residents were seated.

Tsunade noticed the way that Orochimaru’s experiments tensed at her arrival. There was a hunted look in their eyes, but they forced themselves to relax as Sakura entered. Everyone seemed to brighten at Sakura’s arrival, but Tsunade doubted that Sakura even noticed. The girl had no idea the power she wielded, with the trust she’d earned from everyone around the table. They were from all from different walks of life: legendary Founders, clan heirs, social outcasts, and former transients, but Tsunade noticed no difference in the way Sakura behaved around them, bustling around to make sure everyone was settled with refreshments. Grudgingly, Tsunade felt her respect for Sakura rise.

“How was the town hall meeting?” Ino asked as Tsunade sat down. “Were any decisions made?”

Tsunade glanced at Naruto, whose face was uncharacteristically serious. “A petition has been put forth,” she said, still spinning from the new development. “Minato Namikaze has been recalled; we will be electing a new mayor.”

“Good,” Naruto bit out, fury clouding his features. His eyes flashed crimson for a moment before
settling to their normal shade of blue. “Da--Minato was unworthy of the office.”

“What does this mean?” Yamato asked, looking between Tsunade and Sakura. Tsunade noted the way he sought Sakura for answers.

“It means,” Tsunade said, speaking clearly, “that change is finally upon Pompeii.” She looked at Sakura. “And the change is falling in your favor.”

Sakura’s eyes flew open and she frowned, rolling over to check her phone. It was 3:07 AM. What on earth had woken her?

She frowned, something niggling at her. A whisper of sound. She stopped moving, concentrating upon what she heard. It was barely perceptible, akin to white noise or the babbling of water.

Sakura reached out and turned on her lamp, sitting up in bed. She plucked her hearing aids from the shallow metal dish that charged them, popping them into her ears.

The sound, instead of clarifying, vanished completely.

Sakura scrubbed her face, sighing as she stretched. It was apparent that sleep was beyond her right now.

She removed the hearing aids, closing her eyes and listening.

The noise filled her ears again, a pleasant, soft buzz to it. Unwittingly, Sakura’s eyes filled with tears and she pressed her face into her knees as her shoulders shook. She hadn’t expected to care this much about being able to feel and hear the vibrations with her own ears. The sensation lulled her into a sleepy state and she sat there, perched on her bed, in a stupor-like state for some time.

...lost...

Sakura snapped back to awareness, straining her senses. The word cut through the white clearly, though Sakura couldn’t identify anything about the speaker. It was androgynous and felt like it was beyond the realm of most descriptions. It was, however, gentle. “Lost? What is lost?” she asked.

...lost outside...

Sakura got to her feet, throwing on a coat and scarf. Winter was drawing to a close, but the nights were still bitter. She threw on her socks and stuffed her feet into her boots, pocketing her hearing aids as she made her way out of her bedroom. During the building process, she’d requested a single apartment, set with its own living room and kitchen. Yamato understood and created an absolutely stunning apartment, far larger than her previous one.

She drew a flashlight from a kitchen drawer before she grabbed her blades and slipped the obsidian one into her coat pocket, holding the other in hand, beneath her sleeve. It never hurt to be cautious, though she was nearly certain that the voice held no ill will toward her. It beckoned, whispering “lost” and “outside” over and over among the faint white noise.

Sakura slipped out her apartment door, mindful of the light sleepers on the hall. Yamato had the bedroom to her right, Ino the one to her left. She tiptoed down the hall, easing open the stairwell door and sliding beyond it. She traipsed her way down the stairs, hand on the ornate banister that Yamato carved from Sai’s designs. Down she went, all four floors until she found herself standing outside.

Sakura drew her scarf up around her face, wishing she had the foresight to wear a hat as well. The
white noise increased as Sakura began walking the perimeter, mindful of the protective barrier around her home. She was curious, but she wasn’t stupid.

There, just beyond the perimeter, stood Zetsu. He was pacing back and forth, muttering to himself. Truthfully, it seemed more like arguing.

“Zetsu,” Sakura called, noting that the white noise faded away. “Zetsu, are you alright?”

Zetsu looked up at her, startled. His gold eyes reflected the light of the flashlight and Sakura could see the confusion in his expression. “She’s gone,” he said, voice small.

“Who is gone?” Sakura asked, staying on her side of the barrier.

“My mistress,” he said, casting his gaze around him. “My purpose…”

Sakura swallowed, something cold creeping up her spine. It curled around her throat and suddenly she was suffocating once more. “You speak of Kaguya.”

Zetsu’s eyes shot wide. “You know her?”

“She tried to murder me,” Sakura said.

Zetsu shook his head, his brow puckering. “No, you are good. You are kind. She wouldn’t try to hurt you. She wouldn’t try to take you from me.”

“She tried,” Sakura replied. “Why did you serve her, Zetsu? She was evil.”

“She created me,” Zetsu said simply. “One must serve their creator.”

“She’s gone now.” Sakura gulped. “I killed her.”

Zetsu blinked at that, recoiling from her. “You?”

Sakura nodded, watching Zetsu carefully. He hadn’t made any moves against her, but she was wary. “She was killing me,” Sakura explained. “If I hadn’t fought back, she would have killed me and then moved on to kill everyone else in Pompeii.”

Zetsu clutched at his head, grimacing. He fell to his knees, arguing furiously with himself. Sakura, unable to read his lips at this position, placed in one of her hearing aids. The anger within his words was all self-directed.

“Zetsu, Zetsu!” Sakura shouted, trying to catch his attention. As he dug his nails into himself, inflicting self-harm, Sakura darted beyond the barrier and grabbed his hands. His head whipped up in her direction. “Stop! You need to stop, Zetsu! You’re working yourself into a frenzy.”

He slumped, energy leaving him. Sakura kept a grip of his hands as his shoulders began to shake, wracked with sobs.

“She’s gone,” he moaned, pressing forward and resting awkwardly against Sakura’s shoulder.

“I know,” Sakura replied, stroking his hair between the leaves of the venus fly trap. “I know. I’m sorry.”

Sakura held him as he cried, doing what she could to soothe him. What could she say to him? She was responsible for Kaguya’s death. Sakura doubted that anyone else mourned her loss, but Zetsu’s pain was a fresh reminder of what she’d done. Sakura’s stomach turned, but she held it together as
Zetsu pulled away from her.

“Where will I go?” Zetsu asked, pleading with Sakura for answers. “What shall I do? I am nothing without her.”

“You are Zetsu,” Sakura said firmly. “You are someone, regardless of the existence of others.” She chewed her lip, warring in her mind. She knew that the others would not be pleased, but Sakura would not leave him like this: fragmented and broken as an indirect result of her actions. “If you would like, you may come with me. You are welcomed to our home and hearth, Zetsu.”

Zetsu looked up at her as if she was the answer he’d been seeking. “Yes,” he said, assisting her to her feet. “I will go with you.”

The whispers remained silent.

Sakura hummed to herself as she braided Kin’s hair, twisting the strands into a cascade.

“Your hair is getting long,” Ino commented from behind Sakura, running a brush through her hair. Ino had decided that she wanted to practice her hair styling skills, which led them to right now. Sai and Yamato had already fallen prey to Ino’s practice and Indra was up next. “It’s past your shoulder blades.”

“Really?” Sakura asked, turning slightly. “I hadn’t noticed. I guess I haven’t gotten it cut in quite some time.”

“Don’t cut it,” Ino said. “I’ll trim the dead ends, but it looks fantastic at this length.”

“Long hair is easier to pull out of your face,” Kin said, glancing up at Sakura.

“Maybe,” Sakura said. “I’ll see how it handles at work. If it’s a hassle, I’ll be cutting it off.”

Ino pouted and opened her mouth to respond, only to stop as a ringing chime sounded through the room. Everyone tensed, looking at the bell that hung in the corner of the room. Sakura looked to Yamato, who nodded.

“Someone’s at the border,” Yamato said.

“Did anyone have a guest visiting?” Sakura asked, looking around at the others. They all looked mystified. “Kin do you know if Zaku invited anyone over?”

Kin snorted, moving out from beneath Sakura’s ministrations and getting to her feet. “Everyone Zaku knows is in this room.”

Sakura stood as well, sighing as she looked over everyone. “Well, let’s go out and greet them.” She narrowed her eyes at Ashura and Indra. “Do not bring your swords.”

“Try and stop me,” Indra said, crossing his arms. “I will not allow harm to come your way.”

Sakura rolled her eyes but moved toward the door, knowing that she had to pick her battles. This wasn’t one that she’d win today. Sakura moved through the door first and her entourage piled through after her.

“Where’d it originate?” Sakura asked, letting Yamato take point.

“This way,” Yamato said, heading off to the side of their building.
Ahead of them was an all too familiar 1978 Chevrolet Camaro, parked at the very edge of the barrier. Yagura was perched upon it, with Kisame standing at his shoulder. Yagura smirked as he took in the people at Sakura’s back. He moved off of the car, straightening his cufflinks.

“It is good to see you, Sakura,” Yagura said, “and your entourage.” He nodded at the people surrounding her.

“What brings you here, Yagura?” Sakura asked. “Are you here on personal or Kiri business?”

“I’m afraid this visit isn’t for pleasure,” Yagura said. “I am here on official business. Will you not invite us in?”

Sakura glanced at her companions, seeing the way their fingers flexed on both seen and hidden weapons. “Not today.”

Yagura’s smirk widened into a smile. “Understandably. I am only here to let you know that Kiri recognizes your power within Pompeii. Kisame is here as my witness.”

Sakura’s brow furrowed. “I’m sorry?”

“You know as well as I do that there are different factions within Pompeii. Most, like the Senju and the Uchiha, are separated by clans or clan alliances, like the Yamanaka, Nara, and Akimichi. Kiri is a faction defined by its skillset.” His heavy-lidded eyes perused Sakura slowly. “You have founded a group of your own.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Sakura said.

“You started with the clone and the soldier, but you’ve slowly accrued a group of misfits and outcasts for yourself,” Yagura said, ignoring the way everyone at Sakura’s back clenched their jaws and fists. “We are here to let you know that Kiri offers you our full support and we are prepared to make a formal alliance.”

Sakura looked back at her companions, taking in their repressed anger. “Perhaps,” Sakura said, returning her attention to Yagura. “As you can see, I didn’t even realize we were considered as such. Allow us some time to consider.”

Yagura inclined his head. “Of course,” he said. “Kisame.”

Kisame stepped forward, brandishing a briefcase. Sakura moved through the barrier, ignoring the noises that the others made, and took the briefcase from him. Kisame gave her a warm smile but remained silent.

Yagura began to climb into the car, but paused, looking over at Sakura’s eclectic group. “I look forward to seeing the upcoming changes you’ll bring.”

Sakura shivered, tucking her chin into her knees. It was early morning and the sun was just beginning to rise, the sky lightening in increments. She stared down into the pond, wishing that the calm she used to experience in this clearing would settle her again.

Unfortunately, as she glanced over at the broken shrine, Sakura knew that the magic of this place, the essence of the Maiden was gone. It had been consumed by the peach tree and Kaguya, though the signs of both were no more. Still, Sakura never heard any whispers here, so perhaps the Maiden’s power still lingered.
Things were going well, for the most part. Everyone was settling into the new home, though not without some tension. It was impossible to avoid stepping on each other’s toes from time to time. Still, Sakura thought that they all got along rather well considering. At the very least, they always showed up for Thursday night dinners and movie nights.

She got along well with all of her coworkers and it was paced slowly enough that her healing was nearly complete. Sakura enjoyed the clinic’s atmosphere and the kindness offered by everyone there.

Pompeii was slowly reacclimating to her presence. She’d received countless apologies, some more heartfelt than others. Sakura wasn’t all that sure what she thought of Pompeii’s denizens. With the upcoming recall election, they were moving in the right direction, but she wasn’t sure what that meant for her personally. Where were they when she was being defamed? Where were they when she was sacrificing herself for their sakes?

She hadn’t forgiven them, not yet.

Sakura needed time to gain clarity and peace around the past year. She deserved it and owed it to herself.

There was still tension. There was so much bitterness hidden away in different pockets of Pompeii; rage built upon experienced injustices. Sakura defeating Kaguya had turned down the heat for the moment, but Sakura knew it was only a matter of time before the pot boiled over again. This time though, Sakura knew she would be ready.

“Ah, Sakura, what a surprise!”

Sakura blinked, coming out of her introspection and turning toward the interloper. Before her stood Danzo, armed with a cane to make his way across the rough terrain. He smiled at her, raising a hand in greeting.

“Danzo,” Sakura said, nodding in acknowledgement.

“I am surprised you would return to this site,” Danzo said, groaning as he knelt beside her. “I know you fought for your life here.”

“The good memories outweigh the bad,” Sakura said, tracing a finger through the icy water. She watched the ripples spread out from the touch. “This is a sacred spot for me.”

“I am glad to that your battle with Kaguya did not pervert the experience,” Danzo said, eyes following the ripples.

“What brings you here?” Sakura asked, curious despite herself.

This location was important to her, but why would he care about it? It had been a site of spectacle in the first few weeks post-Kaguya, but now? The remnants of police tape at the edges of the clearing spoke of the time that had passed and the lack of reverence offered to the broken shrine.

“It is a good place to contemplate,” Danzo said, smiling at her. “Mere feet from where we sit you swung the pendulum, changing the course of history.”

Sakura felt a flush rise to her cheeks. “It wasn’t as elegant as all of that,” Sakura said, remembering the stench of fear, desperation, and righteous anger that clung to her during the fight. She hadn’t been thinking of noble goals, only her survival. “It certainly was not as important as you’re making out.”

Danzo shook his head. “Look at the ripples your touch left upon the surface of the pond. Consider
them as Kaguya, doing as she pleased and affecting all around her.” He reached out with his cane, dipping the head of it beneath the surface. Concentric circles echoed out from the touch, colliding with Sakura’s ripples. “This is you, rising up and casting Kaguya down from her dominion. You upset her balance; surpassed it. The changes you wrought are still taking shape.” He regarded her seriously. “Never underestimate your power here in Pompeii. Pompeii has chosen you as one of its beloved.”

With those words, Danzo got to his feet and began the slow trek back into town.

Sakura stared into the pond, watching the ripples clash with each other. Danzo’s words and metaphor were eloquent, but the result looked like a cataclysmic disaster. She hoped that this part of the metaphor wouldn’t play out in life.

She wasn’t sure if she wanted to be responsible for so much change.

Sakura looked back to the Maiden’s shrine, seeking answers there. She noticed a small clump of white growing near the base, between the fissure left by the peach tree.

Dandelions.

Sakura snorted, shaking her head at herself. She was acting silly. Change was the only constant in the world; she wasn’t its progenitor. Hell, even nature was trying to remind her of that fact, in the very changing of the seasons.

Spring was here.
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sakura felt numb as she pulled herself up the front porch stairs and through the large arching doors. They opened on their own, welcoming her home, and she was grateful for the enchantment. Once across the threshold a seed of strength took root in her chest and Sakura breathed deep. It wasn’t an old home, but when she inhaled there was history and character in the air, scenting every breath.

Her watch read the time as half past ten at night, but it felt so much later.

Sakura felt something at her back and turned around so the wall hooks didn’t have to stretch as far to pick her coat off her shoulders.

Last she had been back, Tsunade had been working on the enchantment, but since the mayoral races had begun, she hadn’t had much time left to spare. It was a demanding gig, campaigning as Minato’s replacement. Several others citizens of Pompeii had surged to make bids of their own, and it was a whole week before the serious candidates were sifted out of the bulk of hopefuls.

“Is that Sakura?”

Sakura looked up and smiled. “As if you didn’t know the second my car crossed town limits.”

“Hey, you never know, I might get distracted one of these days and miss it,” Ashura chuckled.

He shuffled into the room in an oversized fluffy robe from deep in her closets that made her want to laugh. Instead she reached for the edges and curled her fingers into the plush softness. Ashura easily drew her in, resting one wrist over the other behind her back.

“Welcome home,” he whispered.

“What...smells so good?” she asked, feeling her eyes drift shut once more. It had been a struggle to stay awake. “Potatoes?”

Ashura pouted, but turned around to draw her under his arm and guide her into the kitchen where the aroma drifted. Indra stood in front of the oven, cutting into a steaming golden yellow breakfast casserole made from fresh eggs, hash browns, and an assortment of other delectable breakfast meats.

“Oh Indra,” Sakura moaned, eyes watering as her empty stomach did flips. She was so tired, but she knew she couldn’t go to sleep until she had some food.

“You’ve been neglecting yourself. Here, come eat,” Indra said, already cutting out a portion for her and placing it on one of the china dishes. Ashura led her into a chair at the kitchen table and then left to fetch a glass of water.

“It takes so long to get home to begin with,” Sakura complained, sounding younger and more childish. Yamato would often tease her about how she seemed to regress in age whenever she was hungry and sleepy. “I didn’t want to stop for food. I just wanted to get home.”
Yamato and Sai took turns with Ashura and Indra watching over her when she got home from work. She worked hard long shifts and came home spent and in dire need of pampering. It became something the whole house quickly picked up on and soon shifts were sorted out to the housemates all for the sake of keeping Sakura well fed and rested.

“We are always eager to have you back under this roof, but you worry us with how you neglect your own body. A few minutes more doesn’t change much in the grand scheme of things. Here now, eat,” Indra said. He held the fork out to her and Sakura took it, stabbing at the breakfast casserole that warmed her belly like all good comfort food should.

Sakura finished over half the plate before she remembered to breathe. She took Ashura glass and drank deeply before picking up her fork again. That’s when she noticed the cute blue and white pattern of the dishes.

“Are these new?” she asked.

“Said picked them out from a local thrift shop. He’s been quite handy about decorating this place up. Do you like the plate?” Ashura asked. He had come back to sit across from her at the table in his fluffy robe.

Indra reached down and pinched some of the robe’s fabric between his fingers. “Why are you wearing this again?”

“Let go, Sakura said I could.”

Ashura batted his brother’s hand away with a solid smack that Sakura chose to ignore. The two quarreled enough for her to know when it was appropriate to stay out of it and let them have their space.

“I like the plates,” Sakura finally answered. “They remind me of...I think it was a tea set I had as a child. It’s a pretty color though. I’ll have to compliment him on his choices when I see him in the morning.”

A yawn broke off the rest of what she wanted to say and Sakura nearly dropped her head onto the table for how tired she suddenly felt. Her belly was warm and full, her plate pretty and empty, but why did she feel so wrong?

Ashura was beside her in an instant, tugging off his robe to lay over her. It was warm too, and big enough that it felt like a blanket.

“You’re going to make me fall asleep at this table,” she chuckled into the wood grains.

“You do a fine enough job of that all on your own. The hours of your work establishment are just too unreasonable. Why can’t you quit?” Indra asked. “We have the money for it.”

“We have so much money. If you don’t believe us we can go get more. There’s tons of it buried in Pompeii that only we know how to get to. You’d never have to work another day in your life,” Ashura added. He sounded worried

“It’s not about the money anymore,” Sakura said, feeling another yawn budding at the base of her jaws. “I-I just want to work. I need to work.”

“You work too hard,” Indra said, voice turning hard in the beginning stages of anger. “Look at the state you come home in every four days. You’re a beautiful mess someone has to clean up or else you'd be left in a puddle on the doorstep.”
Sakura turned her head over and smiled up at the older brother. Seeing the look on her face his cheeks turned red and his ears twitched.

“You think I’m a beau-ti-ful mess?” she asked, teasing out the sounds in the word beautiful. Her own cheeks flushed pink.

“You’re a minx,” he grumbled, placing a wide palm over the lower half his face and spreading his fingers over the other half. A single eye poked through to watch her. Indra didn’t handle embarrassment as well as his brother.

“My brother has a point though, and yes, Sakura, you’re always beautiful. But back to the main point here, you’re running yourself ragged,” Ashura interrupted. “Can’t you go back to being Pompeii’s doctor? They need one.”

“No way. They can get by just fine without a doctor. They chose to forgo my services for months during the whole Kaguya fiasco. They can manage.”

“I’d be inclined to agree,” Ashura sighed, “but we miss you too much. You’re gone so much. Can’t you find something else to do that’s closer? We want to see you every night, not every four nights.”

Sakura felt a little guilty, but not guilty enough to change her mind. “I’m not ready to work in this town again,” she whispered. “Not yet.”

Ashura opened his mouth, but it was Indra that tugged him back. “She’s entitled to that,” Indra said before his younger brother could get any of his words out. “If she changes her mind, the clinic will finish its repairs in a number of weeks. If Sakura never changes her mind that’s fine too. It’s her choice. You agree with me, it’s more than they deserve after how they treated her.”

Sakura shut her eyes and felt the warmth from her dinner fade. She was cold on the inside again. It was too easy to remember how friends turned away and avoided her eyes. Parents who she thought she got along with lashed out more viciously than their children. And what was worse was the apologies that came, because she couldn’t bring herself to be okay with most of them. She didn’t want to forgive anyone. They wanted to burn her at the stake at one point. How does a person come back from that and ask to be your friend?

“Sakura? Are you still awake?”

Sakura lifted her head and felt the tears filly slip with the help of gravity. “I’m too tired to be asleep,” she mumbled.

“Then here,” Indra said, reaching for her. He picked her up, pinning her robe around her and folding her close to his chest.

Ashura moved around his brother to push in the kitchen chair and open doors when Indra got to Sakura’s bedroom.

The walls were painted a dusky blue that blended up into a black ceiling dotted with stars and swirling celestial figures in Sai’s unique style. The bed was left in the center of the room, big and wide enough for her to roll around in and spread out in her sleep...or entertain the warmth of another if she ever wished for it. The gauzy curtain embroidered with stars and flowers was a gift from Ino that Ashura had to pull back to allow Indra better access to the mattress.

“I need to brush my teeth,” Sakura moaned, weakly flapping her free hand.

“Here, and don’t make it a habit,” Indra said, producing a shard of enchanted floride. Sakura took it
from his fingers and felt the tingle in her mouth as the spell cleaned her teeth.

“And don’t forget,” Ashura sighed, “you need to be dressed for bed.”

Ashura slipped a metal ring onto her pinky and moved away. Sakura recognized the gift as one of his from when they all first moved it. There was a spirit in the ring that dressed her in any elaborate dress or suit she desired, no matter how elegant or extravagant. It was a glorious gift, but Sakura ended up only using it to change into silk pajamas without getting out of bed.

“You guys are life savers,” Sakura murmured dreamily.

“Literally,” Indra affirmed, tone serious once more.

Sakura just chuckled. “Thank you. Niiiiight….”

Indra turned to head out and leave her be, but Ashura moved forward and leaned over her mattress until he could reach her face with his lips. He kissed the side of her jaw and rubbed his nose into her loose hair before pulling back. Sakura hummed in appreciation, still not quite asleep.

Indra’s expression was a cross between horrified and outraged.

Ashura just shrugged and whispered, “What? She doesn’t mind.”

“You-you cad.”

Ashura rolled his eyes. “You’re just jealous.”

Indra left the room fuming while Ashura was more content than a cat with his cream.

In the morning Sakura woke half across the bed, wrapped in layers of a silk night dress. Her hair was a mess on her pillow, but that wasn’t anything she couldn’t fix on her own.

If Kin saw her looking so out of place she’d have a fit and then insist Sakura take a seat while she fixed her hair. Kin was always meticulous about things like hair, and Sakura had only asked about it once.

“My hair was the only nice thing I had for myself at one point in my life.”

It was the morning of her first of four days off before she would have to go back and work another four days at the clinic, which was an odd set up, but it was fine for now. She was doing well and got along well with everyone there, but she didn’t want to admit out loud of how of place she felt. Even in Pompeii with all its monsters, she had clicked right away.

She was uneasy among humanity, as funny as it was.

Sakura climbed out of bed and winced at the open window with all its sunlight. It didn’t look like morning anymore. No doubt she had slept in again.

Typical.

She almost left for the bathroom when a note on her nightstand caught her eye.

‘Sai and Yamato will be home early, so wake up before 4, okay?’

There was no signature, but she recognized Kin’s handwriting and knew out of all the other housemates that Kin was the only one who gave her so much unfiltered grief. Zaku and Dosu kept a
respectful distance, but not one that made her think they still doubted her. In comparison, they kept everyone else at a much greater distance and rarely came out into the communal spaces.

Sakura took her shower, washed her hair extra nice, braided it back, and brushed her teeth to get rid of the taste of day old magic. By the time she was dressed and roaming the hallways it was even later in the day and she realized that most of her housemates were at work since it was a weekday.

She stopped at the threshold to the old tinted glass greenhouse.

There was at least one person she could still greet that was available.

Inside the temperature went from early March’s chill to a balmy warm that made her want to unfold and lay out on the ground to soak up all the light there was. It was nice and warm, but in addition to all that, a plethora of different plants grew lush and fill under Zetsu’s careful guidance.

“You’re back again.”

Sakura turned to see the half shrouded figure crouching in front of a row of flowers that rotated on a wheel. He didn’t look at her, but didn’t flinch away from her when she approached. Some days when she came in to greet him he was more skittish, forgetting their friendship and regressing to his former self.

“I’m back again,” Sakura echoed. “I always come back.”

“You did not come back yesterday morning, or the morning before that, or the morning before that. One more morning before all of those you were here, but you did not bid me goodbye.” Zetsu spoke without making eye contact.

“I’ve told you about that, haven’t I? I had work. I needed to go to my job.”

“You left!” Zetsu blurted, grabbing the edges of the planter and bracing against it. “I-you were gone and you were not here. You went too far away.”

The boundary of Pompeii, she crossed over it each time she left.

“Were you frightened by my leaving?” she asked, softly.

Zetsu finally glanced her way and a new light came into his golden eyes, and it was like he was seeing her for the first time. He straightened his back and faced his flowers again. “No, I was not frightened. Don’t assume such things,” he answered in a newer voice. It was a mix of old and unknown.

“I missed you and this place,” Sakura admitted easily, holding nothing back. “You make it so pleasant in here. Will you show me what you’ve been working on?”

Zetsu paused before glancing up at her. He nodded stiffly than stood to gesture to a newer corner of the garden. He showed her his favorites and the new plants as well as the old. He updated her on what would be ripe soon and what would take more time to bloom.

Spring was coming soon.

“Will you be here tomorrow?” he asked her when she noticed the time.

“I’ll be here,” she promised.

Zetsu nodded and turned back to his plants. “Very well.”
Sakura watched him a moment more, holding the side of her face, fingers curled around the shell of her ear. Kaguya had left more than just Sakura broken and scarred. There were still plenty of wounds left in the wake of her death.

In the house Kin was eating the food Indra baked. The table had banana bread, scones, and spice muffins. When he saw her coming in from outside Indra shot her a frustrated look.

“All my beautiful breakfast pastries, and you don’t get out of bed until two?”

“I’ve been awake longer than that. I was with Zetsu,” Sakura huffed, reaching for a muffin. She bit into it and moaned aloud at the texture. “And it is never a bad time for your beautiful breakfast pastries, Indra.”

“Look at that, Sakura, his head just grew two sizes. Maybe you should pop it,” Kin teased, waving her own muffin around in the air.

“You’re insufferable,” Indra grumbled.

“That’s not what your mom said last night.”

“Vulgar child.”

“Someone has to be.”

Indra made a gesture with the flat of his hand running across his throat and Kain pantomimed the action of shooting him in the brains.

It was enough to make Sakura sigh. “And here I thought everyone in the house got along.”

Kin barked a laugh. “Not by a long shot.”

“You wouldn’t know anything about that, though,” Indra muttered.

Sakura just laughed and sat down at the table with a new plate and started to load it up with things to try and snack on. While she ate Kin cleaned her hands and went after Sakura’s hair, combing it back and braiding it down the back. It was almost enough to make Sakura fall asleep again.

Sakura opened her eyes and saw Ashura sitting across from her at the table, smiling fondly at her. His smile only grew when she meet his gaze.

“I’m not falling asleep,” she said.

“Could have fooled me.”

“Tell me how your days were while I was gone,” Sakura said, then she listened as each friend shared something new she could respond to.

The sound of the front door opening and closing made her stand, her smile stretching. She knew their footsteps by heart. There was no way she wouldn’t recognize them.

Kin was already leaning against the far wall with her arms crossed, watching the hallway. Ashura stayed in his seat and Indra watched from in front of the oven where a new set of biscuits were baking for dinner.
Sakura left them all behind, turning sharply from one room into the other, until Sai was there, crashing into her. Yamato came up behind them and swallowed both Sai and Sakura in his arms, nearly lifting her off her feet.

“It’s only been four days,” Kin sighed. “Do they have to do that every time she comes home?”

“Yes!” Yamato shouted. “Until she stays home, you better get used to it!”

There was plenty of chuckles and jokes after that, followed by dinner, and then movies. Sai refused to part from her side, and Yamato kept his eyes on her even when she left the room. When she came out of the bathroom he stood at the end of the hallway, checking his phone and waiting for her.

“You’re getting worse,” she teased.

“And you’re getting further away.”

“I’m not. It’s been like this for a while now.”

Yamato rolled his shoulders in a half hearted shrug. “It wasn’t any easier in the beginning, and it’s not getting any easier. You’ve seen Sai.”

“You’re both off tomorrow and Sunday. We’ll hang out. It’ll be okay. I promise to spend more time with you,” Sakura said.

“It’s not just that.”

Yamato sighed, taking her under his arm and leading her back into the living room. In place of a movie, the local news was on. The news anchor was talking about the local mayoral election. A banner at the bottom scrolled in red and white letters.

“And in other news, a group known as Akatsuki has been officially recognized as a legitimate organization dedicated to keeping local authorities in check. We asked local candidates their opinions on the Akatsuki but received only comments from Itama Senju, the younger brother of Tobirama and Hashirama Senju who some say is just another example of the old powers trying to hang on.”

The image on the television screen cut to a younger boy with bi-colored hair looking younger than either of his brothers. He wore a suit, but all Sakura could see was a boy playing dress up.

Itama addressed the microphone in his face. “I’d welcome any help the citizens might put forth on their own. Grassroots groups are a sign of an active community, and that’s what Pompeii is.” He smiled brilliant and then a new reporter pushed through.

“Senju, Itama Senju, what about the experiments left over?”

Itama’s smile twitched.

“Of course they’re an issue we need to address. The people of Pompeii come first, and their safety is my top priority.”

A new reporter pushed in and redirected the flow of conversation back to the Akatsuki members, and what Itama thought of them personally. Sakura thought Itama’s answers sounded like the came from a cereal box they were so stiff. He was a puppet, and she knew exactly who was pulling the strings.

“Experiments?” Sakura echoed. “What are they talking about?”
“Us.”

Sakura turned in her seat to see Zaku and Dosu standing in the doorway, glaring at the television screen. Kin was a shadow not much further back, watching as well. Dosu touched the curse mark on his neck and winced.

“They’re talking about Orochimaru’s failed experiments...us. Itama wants us rounded up and deported,” Dosu explained.

“What else is new?” Zaku hissed. “No one’s ever welcomed us, not really. Not anywhere except here. Pompeii isn’t much different.”

“They-they can’t do that,” Sakura said, feeling the stone of dread deep in her belly. “That’s cruel and inhumane. They wouldn’t do something like that!”

“They can do whatever they want with us. To them, we’re no better than garbage.” Kin said, sounding faded in comparison to earlier in the day. Her voice was a ghost of its former self. “And besides, none of them are human, and neither are we. What does that matter?”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back, my lovelies, I hope you’ve enjoyed the latest chapter in this labor of love. It's been a long time coming.

Let me tell you, it's been a surreal sort of experience to step back into something as big as 'Pompeii' after time away and then try to make something new for it. There was so much work and talk about the next steps as well as what sort of direction we wanted to take after our break. I'm excited for you guys to meet all the new and old characters we have lined up for the coming chapters.
“Where are you going?”

Sakura turned, refusing to jump as she met Yamato’s gaze. She was hypervigilant and she knew it, flinching at the smallest of sounds. There was a storm swirling within Yamato’s eyes and Sakura resisted the urge to sigh. She did not have the energy for the fight Yamato was bound to pose in response to her plans. “I am going into town.”

“No.”

Sakura crossed her arms, squaring her shoulders as she stared Yamato down. “No? Are you going to forcibly stop me?”

Yamato fidgeted, eyes darting away from her before almost unwillingly being dragged back into her orbit. “That isn’t what I meant Sakura.”

“Yamato, you know I don’t like having decisions made for me,” Sakura said, keeping her voice even. “I know you hate it too.”

“Pompeii isn’t safe,” Yamato replied. “They were burning effigies of you scant weeks ago! What is there preventing them from trying to harm you now?”

“Moving from an effigy to the actual person is a severe escalation,” Sakura said. “Besides, I still have friends in town.” At least, she thought so. Certainly, there were people in the aftermath who outright declared allegiance to the “Sakura camp.” Sakura had no idea what weight these verbal allegiances would hold, but she certainly considered them suspect. “I need to purchase a few things.”

“Why not use online shopping?” Yamato asked. “Or I could go into town and purchase what you need for you?”

Sakura shook her head resolutely. “No Yamato. This is important to me. I need to go into town myself, see the people there, let them see me in return.” Sakura sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. “If there is any chance for reconciliation down the road--and I am not saying that there is--then I have to actually be around these people.”

Sakura paused, throat burning with the threat of bile. Even now, the memories of the town, her home, shifting from apprehension to suspicion to fear and finally to hatred towards her were still incredibly vivid. When she dwelt too long on everything that happened, on the scars that were so much deeper than skin, Sakura nearly drowned in the pain. She didn’t want that; she hated the jagged, broken feelings still within her, like puzzle pieces that just did not fit anymore.

“This is something that I need to do for myself,” Sakura said. “If I want to heal and move on--” Sakura’s hands fluttered up to her neck, tracing across the scars gouged out there by Kaguya’s hands. “--I have to return to Pompeii. I have to put those demons to bed myself.”

Yamato reached out ever so gently, taking the hands that clutched at her throat. He unfurled Sakura’s white-knuckled hands, rubbing circles until she loosened her grasp completely. His eyes were sad as his fingers traced the irritated skin of her scars. “I understand,” he said, feeling the column of her throat. “I’m sorry that you are suffering under this burden. May I go with you into town?”
“It is kind of you to offer,” Sakura said, unbothered by the fact that Yamato’s hands were still on her throat. Unlike with Kaguya, this gesture from Yamato was not threatening at all. Sakura trusted him completely; Yamato would never do anything to hurt her. “However, this is something I need to do on my own.”

Yamato’s eyes slid shut, expression pained for a moment. “Of course. I was worried you would say that.”

Sakura laughed, the column of her throat rippling beneath his touch. Yamato couldn’t get enough of the feel, the proof of Sakura’s continued livelihood. “I’ve always been a difficult individual but I am afraid you are stuck with me.”

“You’re the opposite of difficult,” Yamato said frankly. “Stay safe while you are in town. If you need anything while you’re there, text me. I’ll be there.”

Sakura grinned, moving out of Yamato’s grasp as she leaned in and popped a kiss against his cheek. “You’re wonderful. I’ll see you soon!”

Yamato watched her go, contemplative. As she disappeared from view, he raised a hand to his face, touching the spot Sakura kissed. Despite his continued concern over Sakura’s visit to town, Yamato couldn’t help the goofy grin on his face. He turned back to the building and headed inside to sit on the roof, waiting to receive Sakura’s call or see her safely home, whichever came first.

Despite her fierce defense of her decision to enter town, Sakura still found herself hesitating as she approached. The trees, once her enemy and now a source of comfort to her, began to thin, a universal indicator of civilization.

And yet Sakura couldn’t get the thought of burning effigies, mob mentalities, and scapegoat sacrifices out of her mind. She swallowed around her suddenly dry throat, lifting a hand to her the single scar on her face, across her forehead where the branch she used to stab Kaguya caught her too. It ached sharply and she shook her head against the sudden disorientation that nearly blinded her.

When her vision cleared, Sakura was standing in front of a small shopping strip. She glanced around at the signs, blinking when she realized she recognized Kimimaro’s dentistry. This was her old office.

Sakura assessed the strip with new eyes, impressed by just how much had changed in the scant months since everything went down. The last time she was here, really here, Sai was injured, Yamato kidnapped, and the clinic in ruins.

Now, the building was erected once more, in cleaner, crisper lines than before. It looked nice aesthetically but something about it was empty.

Maybe it was the fact that it reeked of Senju intervention.

Something in her chest eased and relaxed, something that she had no idea was even out of sorts.

This was no longer her home.

Certainly, she still had her memories, those rosy, idealized thoughts when she first arrived in
Pompeii. She didn’t cling to those exactly, though she found herself ruminating on the way they popped like the flimsy soap bubbles they were.

The memories that Sakura carried near and dear to her heart though were those of the people who occupied her clinic and home. And, looking at the remote, distant storefront that was once the center of her world, Sakura found that she did not feel anything for it. It was nothing but a shallowly pretty thing, with nothing in it now but stale air.

The parts about it that once mattered to Sakura left with its initial destruction. Her home, her people, were safe elsewhere and Sakura couldn’t keep from smiling.

Once upon a time, the destruction of this place meant the shattering of her world at its very foundations.

Now?

Well, her world continued spinning on.

“Sakura?”

Sakura stiffened, head pounding as she kept still, allowing her eyes to flick to the side. Damn. She should have been paying attention to the corvids that lingered here.

“Uchiha,” Sakura greeted coolly, watching Sasuke approach from the corner of her eye. He seemed unkempt, flustered in a way she had never seen him. “What brings you here?”

He just watched her, almost desperately, eyes flickering between red and gray as he took her in. Sasuke’s hands fluttered like he wanted to reach out and grab her, ensure himself that she wasn’t a mere phantom.

“Well?” Sakura asked, staring him down with a hard look. He had been among the first to cast blame upon her, the vitriol that spewed from his mouth still poison bubbling beneath her skin. “Why are you here?”

“Because you are,” Sasuke said, heat high in his cheeks.

Sakura just crossed her arms as Sasuke fidgeted.

“I just...I needed to make sure you’re alright,” Sasuke muttered. “Our birds aren’t allowed in your territory.” Sakura wasn’t sure if one of the Uchiha made that rule or if one of her roommates enforced it. “After everything that happened, I had to see.”

“I’m not alright,” Sakura said bluntly, taking no satisfaction in the way he flinched. Truthfully, she was tired and realized that this was the first of many, many conversations she would be having with Pompeii’s residents today. “But I’m getting better.”

The ‘no thanks to you’ lingered between them, almost palpable.

“Sakura, I wanted to visit, I wanted to…” Sasuke swallowed, unable to swallow his pride enough to apologize even now.

“No,” Sakura said, shaking her head. “You didn’t. Not really. If you really wanted to, you would have. It’s as simple as that.” She rubbed her arm, uncomfortable with his proximity. She couldn’t forget the ugliness in his confrontations with her and Sai. “It isn’t my job to alleviate your guilt; you’ll have to figure that bit out yourself. Now, could you leave me be? I have errands to run.”
Sasuke stepped back and his face twisted for a moment, briefly mirroring that disgust he once directed her way months ago, before falling to shame. Sakura felt a savage pulse through her scars as she realized that Sasuke came here just to assuage his own feelings, undoubtedly hoping for an easy forgiveness.

He wasn’t going to get it.

Not from her. Not right now.

Sakura wasn’t particularly angry anymore, that rage burnt brightly and quickly, collapsing on itself within the first few weeks following her showdown with Kaguya. What remained was an ineffable sadness, lingering and clinging to her and all her memories involving the majority of Pompeii’s sadness.

Sakura didn’t hold a grudge toward any of them; it was too overwhelming and exhausting. But she didn’t trust any of them and that was the crux of the matter.

She couldn’t forgive and she certainly couldn’t forget what happened.

Sasuke cleared his throat, cheeks flushed as he rubbed at the back of his neck. “Well, I will leave you to it, Sakura.”

Sakura nodded and watched as he turned, transformed, and flew away. She looked at the corvids that still lingered in the area, meeting their red, judging eyes. Sakura shrugged at them, taking one last look at her former home before continuing on her journey into town.

Sakura kept her head high as she balanced her groceries on one arm, the gazes of the citizens around her like a brand. Few dared approach her and she had seen neither hide nor hair of any of the Senju or Uzumaki.

Well, aside from the posters.

Everywhere she walked, Itama Senju’s face was plastered on signs, telling the people of Pompeii that a vote for Itama was a vote for order.

Sakura snorted, shaking her head wryly. It seemed that the Senju’s fall from grace taught them nothing. Sakura thought that maybe, just maybe, their public dressing down at the hands of Tsunade would dissuade the Senju, but she supposed that just was not the way of things.

Instead, the Senju moved forward with the same old message, just with another face as the leader.

One who seemed malleable, perhaps even a bit simple-minded. Certainly, Sakura had never heard of Itama before this election.

Sakura pressed on toward Kakuzu’s shop, shifting her mind away from politics. It was not her problem. She had lost herself once in the goings on of Pompeii and been scorned for it. Sakura would focus on her group of people and leave the rest of Pompeii to itself. Let the people of Pompeii consume themselves like Ouroboros; they were not her responsibility.

She paused as she caught a wash of pink on one of the posters. Sakura turned her attention to it, blanching as she took it all in. It was a photo of her, candid from the looks of it. Sakura wasn’t entirely sure who took it, but it looked like it was soon after her fight to the death with Kaguya. Her
head, ears, and eyes had remnants of rusty blood that lingered from the battle. She was staring off at something in the distance, the line of her mouth hard and stubborn. Sakura thought it might have been taken about fifteen minutes before she passed out.

Unlike Itama’s poster, this one was obviously homemade, with a handwritten slogan that read, “The People’s Candidate: Pompeii’s True Maiden.” Sakura’s hands scrabbled at the poster, her breaths coming quick and shallow. Her vision tunneled, staring into her own bright green eyes, lined in rust and gold ichor. What had she been thinking at that moment?

Probably about how much she wanted a stack of waffles, strawberries, and whipped cream before taking a nap.

And people thought she would make a good political leader?

Sakura clutched the poster, tearing it down from the wall. She couldn’t handle this. Not today. Not on top of everything else she dealt with today.

Sakura turned on her heel, ignoring the sharpened focus of passerby, as she started heading out of town. She would text Kakuzu later and apologize; for now, she just wanted to go home.

Sakura put her back to the posters, swallowing as she realized that there were even more of her with different personalized slogans.

She rubbed at the scars on her neck, letting the rough textures ground her as she walked away. She’d made a little bit of progress today and she needed to be satisfied with that.

Sakura inhaled deeply, enjoying the scent of cooking brussel sprouts and bacon as she stirred the skillet. Her shoulders eased, tension leaving her body as good memories of late nights of cooking before a 3 AM shift fill her mind. Those were stressful times as she struggled through coursework and a crazy work schedule. Yet, they were somehow simpler as she had a good support system around her to keep her from falling apart.

And, when she did fall apart, they were there to catch her.

Sakura frowned, brow furrowing as she reminisced over that support system. She clutched her neck as phantom pain pulsed through her scars.

When was the last time she spoke with Ami or anyone else from New York?

“Sakura?”

Sakura turned, train of thought slipping away as she smiled at Dosu. He skulked closer, looking strangely intimidating. Sakura didn’t mind him though, as she knew that it was just the way he walked.

“Hey Dosu, how are you doing?” Sakura said, beckoning closer.

“I’m well,” Dosu said, voice gravelly and eyes alight with interest. “I spent time today on the roof watching the clouds. I did not know they were capable of so much change. Did you know that clouds sometimes take on shapes of things?”

Sakura stifled a laugh at the eagerness that lined his face. “And what shapes did you see?”
“I saw a rose and a house and a mouse and a book,” Dosu sighed happily. “You know, we saw a lot of the sky when we were staying in that abandoned logging mill. But I never really saw it, you know?”

“Well, you had a lot on your mind,” Sakura said delicately. “It’s hard to appreciate beauty when you’re fighting for survival.”

Dosu hummed in agreement. He pecked around her, hovering there awkwardly for a moment before hooking his chin over her shoulder and resting it there. “What are you cooking?”

“Brussel sprouts and bacon,” Sakura said.

“What are brussel sprouts?”

Sakura speared one of the sprouts, making sure to get bacon on the fork before lifting it to Dosu. He leaned forward, but he didn’t take a bite.

“Dosu?”

“Is it supposed to be green?” Dosu said after a few moments.

“Yes,” Sakura replied, jolting slightly. “Have you—are you not used to vegetables?”

Dosu furrowed his brows. “I don’t know. We weren’t really fed in the laboratory; we were hooked up to feeding tubes when they wanted to give us sustenance.” His lip curled in disgust. “Once we got out of the lab, we ate whatever we could find. It wasn’t the most intuitive process to scavenge for solids. But we tended to rummage in the dumpsters and whatever we could get out of the ground or the river. The green things we ate weren’t supposed to be green.” He shuddered, the movement running through Sakura too. “We learned that quickly that mold is not really fit for human consumption, certainly not in large amounts.”

Sakura lifted her free hand to touch Dosu’s face, leaning against him. “I am so sorry to hear that, Dosu. I know there is nothing that I can do to change the past, but I hope I can help with making better memories in the future.” She moved the fork around, trying to make it appear tempting. “I think you’ll like the brussel sprouts. They shouldn’t make your stomach hurt.”

Dosu took the bite from the fork. Sakura waited with bated breath as he ate, grinning as he hummed in satisfaction.

“It’s delicious,” he said. “Thank you.”

“I glad to hear it,” Sakura said softly. “To making new memories.”

“To making new, better memories,” Dosu said. “May I have a plate please?”

Sakura stared into her mirror, brushing her hair out of her face. It was getting quite long now, curling below her collarbones. Her eyes were red-rimmed with exhaustion and her skin pale with lack of being outdoors. She couldn’t say that she looked good, but she certainly looked better than she did beneath the harsh fluorescents at work.

It had been a tiring week and Sakura was glad for her three day break. And she was planning to start it off with an indulgent bath.
Yamato had built the bathroom in a way that seemed right out of Sakura’s childhood fantasies: tiled mosaics, walk-in showers, enormous clawfoot bathtub, high ceilings, and a fancy hanging chandelier made out of various bits and bobs that her roommates had found. Most were precious stones and minerals, some of which Sakura couldn’t even name. It was absurdly gorgeous, an eclectic dream right out a magazine.

It was a place where Sakura could experience complete relaxation and she drew hot water into the bathtub. She poured eucalyptus and mint bubble bath in, sitting on the edge of the tub as it began to fill.

Sakura felt a zinging sensation travel through her scars and she lifted her hands to them. She stood, staring into the mirror. The scar across her forehead was raised and white, the newly formed skin stretched thin and taut like the covering of a drum. The scars left by Kaguya’s nails, however, were hypertrophic, raised and an angry red, redder still when she turned her head and stretched the skin of her neck. They blazed, demanding the attention of anyone who dared to look at her, dared them to see what she survived.

Though they pulsed with pain, Sakura could not see any difference to them.

Sakura.

Sakura shuddered, glancing around as she cinched her robe tighter. The call of her name seemed similar to the way Kaguya spoke with her telepathically, yet not. The voice was different, fainter.

No one was there.

She frowned, slowly releasing her robe as she stared at herself in the mirror.

Sakura raised a hand to her head, which was beginning to ache. She was just overtired.

That was all.

It had to be all.

Sakura dropped her robe and climbed into the bath, closing her eyes as she repeated that mantra over and over again.
Chapter 53

Chapter by Vesperchan

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sakura woke and realized it was too early to be awake, only to jump out of bed and run for the toilet as the pounding behind her head made the rest of her come undone. She threw up into the toilet, thankful for small mercies. After the first lurch there was a moment when she thought she was done before nausea hit her again. Her head was ringing and she had to shut her eyes to it.

There were footsteps coming up behind her and she heard her door creaking back shut. Then there were hands combing through her hair, pulling it back. Sakura glanced up and relaxed when she recognized Sai.

He didn’t say anything, but watched with a worried expression as she emptied the last of her stomach with what was left of her dignity. She moved off her knees and rolled against the wall and Sai followed, hovering like a shadow.

“Sakura?”

“It’s fine, just...something I ate,” she whispered, feeling the sore parts of her throat rub raw. She needed to wash her mouth out and brush her teeth, but she was too tired to stand just yet.

“No one else was getting sick,” Sai helpfully supplied. “Are you sure?”

Sakura cracked one eye open and pouted. Sai stood up and leaned over her to turn on the sink and fill a cup with water. He crouched down a moment later and urged her to have a sip. Sakura forced herself to stand first, but accepted the cup to use in washing out her mouth.

Sai reached behind her and turned on the lights, flooding the dark room with color. Sakura flinched and shut her eyes to it, but not before she noticed the irritation of her scars.

“Your marks!”

Sakura spit out the water and bent over the sink, hiding them from view with her loose hair. “It’s fine.”

Sai pawed at her hair, pulling it back enough to see the scars on her neck, standing out darker and meaner than before. “What are they doing to you?”

The memory came back a moment too late. The proof was in her hands, under her fingernails. “It was me.”

“Wh-what?” Sai’s face showed his confusion well. He had come a long way from the emotionless boy who had to learn how to smile. “What do you mean it was you?”

His eyes were as open and clear as they were beautiful, making Sakura uneasy to show herself to him when she looked anything less than her best, though she knew better. She knew Sai didn’t care about superficial appearances and it was only her anxieties that whispered such cruel things in her head.
Sakura took a deep breath and found the words.

“I did this to myself, in my sleep. I’ve done it a few times...when I have nightmares. I can feel her hands on my neck and I’m back there.” Sakura raised her head and stared at her face in the mirror. She touched one of the marks on her neck. “I’m back there and she’s killing me all over again. I just wanted to get her hands off. I just wanted...I…”

Sai’s arms wrapped around her waist from behind and she watched him in the mirror press himself close to her. His head was bowed into her back, shivering. Sakura reached down and rubbed her hands over his cold fingers.

“I’m better now,” Sakura whispered. “Thank you for coming to check up on me.”

“I don’t want to see you like this. Why is it still hurting you? You’re healing I thought.”

“I am,” she sighed. “My wounds are sealing up and one day not even these marks on my neck will be around, but not all wounds are visible, honey.”

“Why is it still bothering you so bad?” Sai lifted his head enough to press his lips to her spine and kiss the rise of her bones there. “I want you to be better. Isn't there something I can do, or some way I can take this from you?”

She thought her words over carefully before responding. Trauma was hard to understand for most people, even after experiencing it first hand. She understood where her nightmares were coming from, and she knew they were irrational, but the fear still ate at her, gnawing and nibbling on different days.

“It was a serious moment in my life where I nearly died. I’ve never experienced fear like that before. When someone gets hurt, even after they heal or hear an apology, the matters aren’t always fixed so easily.”

She thought of Sasuke in the streets of Pompeii, looking to her for an easy forgiveness. She could forgive him, but nothing would really change. Her pain still existed. Her trauma still haunted her into the night. He didn’t want forgiveness. He wanted her to make him feel better.

“What do I do?” Sai whispered into her neck.

Her hearing wasn’t what it once was, even with Tsunade’s magic and medicine, but Sakura still heard Sai’s confusion loud and clear. Even without sound, she felt the vibration of his plea on her skin.

Sakura turned around and reached for his face. Sai let her do as she pleased, but kept his arms around her waist. “You’ve done more than you know. I dream about you, ya know?”

Sai blinked, surprised. “Me?”

“Yeah, I have lots of different dreams, but you’re a hero in the one’s I’m lucid enough to control. I see you save me and I wake up knowing you’re in this house, close to me. You are my hero. I’m comforted by your presence more than you know.”

“My presence brings you peace?”

“Of course.”

Sai paused to consider this and then nodded. “Would me staying closer to you at night bring you
Sakura snickered before she could stop herself. “Wa-was that your way of trying to sleep with me?” she asked on a laugh, knowing well enough that his desire to sleep with her was nothing more nefarious than cuddling.

He had asked several times in the past and had tried to wheedle his way under her covers more than once. Maybe it had something to do with being so emotionally stunted, but Sai was handsy when left unchecked. Sai loved to trace lines up and down her bare arms, or draw invisible designs into the skin of her wrist with nothing more than the pads of his fingers. His desire to fall asleep next to her was just another example of how touch starved he really was.

“Why is it bad? Does it scare you?”

“No, I trust you Sai, I just…” Sakura couldn’t help but smile. Her fear washed away by his antics. “Are you teasing me right now?”

“No, I honestly want to sleep with you.” He jiggled his shoulders for emphasis.

Sakura rolled her eyes. “If the others could hear you now.”

“They also want to sleep with you. It’s been a topic of conversation on more than one occasion and Indra has threatened to fight several people because of it. Apparently he’s ‘old fashioned’ according to his brother.”

Sakura ducked her head into Sai’s chest to muffle her giggles. “Oh no, don’t tell me that,” she breathed. “I’ll not be able to look any of my friends in the face tomorrow without thinking about it.”

“Then you can just face me?”

Sakura flicked at his nose and laughed when she saw his smirk. He was a bit dense at times, but it seemed she was underestimating him more and more. He laughed back and tugged her back to rock between his arms, like one would with a baby.

“Hang on,” Sakura broke free from her sway and crossed the room to her bed. She pulled off the sheets and comforter before tossing a couple of pillow over her shoulder to Sai, who caught them with ease. “You can carry those down for me.”

“Down where?”

“Just follow and be quiet. Everyone else is asleep.”

Sai did as he was bid and tip toed behind her, as silent as a shadow down the stairs and into the main living room. Sakura dropped her blankets and started to tug two of the couches around before throwing her blankets over them. She pinned the blankets down on the backs of the couches with a few well placed books and then took her pillow to throw underneath the blanket fort.

“What are you doing?” Sai asked, kneeling down to where several couch pillows had fallen.

Sakura felt giddy as she joined him on the floor. “I would do this all the time as a child. It’s a pillow fort.”

“Don’t you mean a blanket fort?”

“Same difference, come on in.”
Sakura tugged on his wrist and then crawled in under the sheets only to turn around and pull her comforter in after her. There were a handful of fluffy throws she tugged off the couch that were useful enough to cushion the floor under them. Even with a plush carpet, the floor was the floor.

“What are we to do here?” Sai asked. He crawled in after her and turned around.

Sakura tugged him down to lay atop a pillow like her and then she threw her comforter over him as well. “Just take a nap, that’s what pillow forts are meant for.”

Sai’s eyes lit up as the comforter settled over his shoulders. “You mean...we get to sleep together?”

“Something like that,” Sakura admitted around a yawn. “Just...go to sleep.”

Sai nodded and then settled in, scooting closer to Sakura’s side of the fort. She didn’t move but she didn’t open her eyes either. Hesitantly, he reached for her hand under the comforter and held it in his, content to fall asleep at last.

This time, there weren’t any nightmares.

Sakura knew the upcoming emergency elections were a big deal, but she didn’t know how big of a deal they would be in her own house. Kin, Dosu, and Zaku especially seemed hyper invested in everything said by the candidates and the pollers who were featured on the news.

Debates were in the evening, after everyone had a chance to come home from work and watch TV, but before the debates each candidate had an opportunity to sit down and answer questions on the local news station.

“Transparency! That’s really not too much to ask. We live in Pompeii for that reason. We’re sick and tired of lies and hiding things. We want to know the truth and for our leaders to be honest with us,” a younger woman entered to the camera before moving off down the sidewalk to carry on with her day’s errands.

“Amen sister,” Zaku cheered, raising a fist and nodding along. Kin made a face at him but it was Dosu who kicked at Zaku’s back, sending the boy tumbling off his pillow seat.

“Hey! Don’t be like that. I’m allowed to have emotions.”

Kin sneered. “You’re not allowed to be annoying.”

“Says who?”

“Says the world, so sit down and shut up,” she snapped back.

Sakura grinned from her place in the kitchen where she helped Indra with the desserts. Cooking was fun, but she really enjoyed unwinding with a good pastry of cake to bake. She doubted she would ever grow out of her sweet tooth and that was just fine considering how many others in the house loved her desserts.

“They’ve been interviewing people all day. Pretty soon they’re going to have talked to every last person in town. How many people have you recognized?” Ashura asked, leaning over to watch Sakura’s hands fold the dough. He seemed oddly fascinated with the process in a way his brother disapproved of.
“A couple,” Sakura answered honestly. She hadn’t bothered to watch every personal interview, but she recognized the voices of a couple of people.

“Is it weird to see them on TV?” Ashura asked.

“Nah. Hang on, can you move these to the side, I need to spread the extra flour so this doesn’t stick.” Ashura moved the items off the counter for her and watched as she continued to work the dough until she was satisfied.

“And what are your opinions on the candidates, both official and otherwise?” the news anchor asked.

Sakura slipped and ended up running her hand off the dough. She scowled and looked up to watch the segment feature a number of campaign posters. In addition to Itama Senju and Tsunade Senju, Mai Terumi was also running, but the fourth poster was the same homemade one she had seen during her walk through town. The candid photo of her was still the same.

Indra stopped his work to watch her as well.

“I think we’re better off without a mayor to be fucking honest,” Hidan sneered before moving away from the camera shoved in his face. He walked behind a tower of tools and then shouted “Anarchy for the people!” somewhere off screen. The camera turned away just in time to avoid the flash of something exploding in his shop.

“I still don’t trust the doctor. She’s not been around since that incident. Pretty suspicious if you ask me. What does she have to hide?” another random citizen answered.

“Bullshit!” both Kin and Zaku screamed at the same time while Dosu threw a pillow. Their reactions made her grin.

“I don’t think it’s fair to put someone who doesn’t want to be in the public eye on a pedestal to criticize or worship,” Hinata Hyuga said, standing in front of a store with her sister at her side. Her eyes were hard and narrowed. “Sakura Haruno has not entered herself into this race and should not be made into a talking point for cheap news. After everything she’s gone through, can’t you understand her desire for privacy? Give her that at least.”

Then, of all people, it cut to Ino who was openly glaring into the camera. She was wearing her apron from work and the salon was in the background. “Itama Senju, are you kidding me? The child is a joke? He’s even more of a puppet than Sasori,” she sneered. Someone off to the side shouted ‘hey!’ to her Sasori comment but Ino flipped them off outside the camera’s edge.

“Hey, you asked. The Senju kid is just a puppet for his brothers and you’ll see that. It’s about time we moved away from the old families who make these messes and cover them up. Tsunade has always been honest about stuff like this, even when it wasn’t popular. She has my vote.”

“What about Mei Terumi?”

Ino shrugged. “Don’t know her as well. She seems decent, but she’s not my first pick.”

“I need to send Ino a gift basket or something,” Sakura sighed. “The girl is too good for me. Hinata too. Why is it so hard for other people to be that smart?”

Kin laughed from the living room. “Because they’re not women!”
Zaku whined in complaint but Dosu just shrugged. “That’s fair.”

The news program cycled through a couple more people before a commercial break that ended in an update on city maintenance story that sounded dry and rehashed. There really wasn’t any new news worth covering that wasn’t the election. It was all anyone seemed to care about.

Sakura finished putting her cookies into the oven and set the timer before taking off her apron and joining Dosu on the couch. She heard the front door open and close while the television cut to an exclusive interview clip the reporter had from a time she met with Itama Senju.

“Pompeii has been my home since forever. Yes it is important to me because of my family, but it’s also super important to me personally. This is the place I’ve made my best memories.”

*Itama Senju*

The adult on the screen smiled more like a child and less like the man posing in suits and promising tremendous things in fancy, rhyming campaign slogans.

“Don’t trust that smile,” Yamato said, sliding up behind Sakura and hugging her around the waist. He leaned down and placed a kiss into her scalp before mumbling a tired ‘I’m home’ into her hair.

“Welcome home,” Sakura greeted.

She reached up with her free hand to run her fingers through his hair. He didn’t pull away but she felt the way his shoulders sagged at her touch. She scratched lightly, catching her fingers in the loop of his bun, but he just groaned in quiet appreciation when his hair came undone around his ears. It was getting almost as long as hers.

“You sound tired,” Sai commented. He was hugging a pillow to his chest and scooting closer to where Sakura sat on the couch. “Was it long?”

“The hours were the same, but the day felt like it lasted forever,” Yamato admitted, face still buried in Sakura’s hair. He seemed reluctant to let her go.

Sai glanced from Sakura to Yamato and hummed in understanding. “I think that time can feel as if it is moving slower when there is something positive you anticipate in the future. I’ve experienced this myself and I can relate.” He paused a moment before nodding and adding, “But welcome back.”

Yamato lifted his head from Sakura’s hair to watch the television flash with different shots of Itama. Sakura remembered then that Yamato had a complicated history with the whole of the Senju family, not just Tobirama and Hashirama. Itama had to be a part of his dark upbringing too, right?

“Is he really so terrible?” Sakura asked, pulling her hand away.

“Not terrible, but untrustworthy. He’s about as flimsy as a jellyfish, with a spine to match. He’ll talk a good story about doing the right thing and standing up to his brothers, but he folds easy.” Yamato’s eyes flashed dangerous. “He can’t be counted on to do anything good if it’s hard or against his brother’s wishes.”

“So he’s a puppet then?” Zaku guessed.

Kin snorted. “I could have told you that. Isn’t that what I said last night, Dosu? I told you he looked like an oven mitt. Ha.”

“That’s what you meant?” Dosu whispered, looking dazed.
“He’s a puppet, of course that’s what I meant!”

Zaku and Dosu both shrugged.

“Debates are starting,” Sakura said, leaning forward. Yamato pulled his hands away only to move around the couch and sit himself down on the floor at her feet. He leaned back and played with her knees until she returned her hands to his hair, brushing her fingers through in soothing patterns.

In the kitchen Indra took out her cookies and replaced the finished tray with the next batch to be baked so she wouldn’t have to get up from her spot and deprive Yamato of his simple pleasure.

The debate rolled on and the first few questions asked of the three candidates were soft balls that had nothing of real merit. No one was going to cast their vote based on what the candidates thought of public education (pay the teachers more!) or road maintenance.

But eventually the subjects evolved and changed. There was an upturn in immigration to Pompeii as more and more visitors were coming in to stay. The hotels and airbnbs were all filling up at an unprecedented rate. Was this an issue of concern?

“The more the merrier, Pompeii is a safe and desirable haven for all. We welcome new friends gladly.” Itama laughed and threw open his arms in a gesture to drive home his point while both Mei and Tsunade frowned.

“That’s an interesting stance since the candidate has expressed concern with other, pre existing members of Pompeii’s community not being desirable neighbors. I’m not sure where his racism ends.”

Kin shot up and screamed, punching the air while Zaku and Dosu both cheered in their own way for Tsunade’s defense of their position.

It was Mei who spoke next, even though it looked like Itama wanted to defend himself as soon as possible. Mei leaned over her podium, close to the mike and stared out into the studio audience as she spoke. “It’s idealistic to think we are safe after enduring a great scare, but are we really? Is Pompeii truly as safe as can be when Orochimaru is still unaccounted for?”

“Orochimaru hasn’t been an issue the police can’t deal with. As for my racism that is slander and uncalled for malarkey of the worst kind. I’ve only shown concern for the safety of our people. Our peace was hard won we should do all we can to preserve it,” the Senju boy complained.

“Candidate Itama Senju,” the moderator interrupted. “Does that mean you would condone investigating Orochimaru sightings?”

“There haven’t been any such sightings to investigate,” he said. “If there were it would be different but the only sightings we have are of rogue agents within our borders.”

“Then you’re as blind as your brothers,” Mei interrupted, cutting in out of turn. The moderator tried to cut her off but Mei ignored him and spoke passionately into her mike. “If you’re not seeing the snake it’s because you don’t want to see him, but he’s there and the citizens from the Kiri district of Pompeii can attest to that if you bother to hear their voice. Orochimaru is still out there and he’s just as much of a threat as the Kaguya kami was.”
Chapter End Notes

Ta da~
Sakura watched the changing colors of the leaves as she continued driving, enjoying the chance to zone out. There were so many things competing for her attention: her job, her roommates, the upcoming election; it was nice to have this time to herself. When she first started this commute, she’d seen it as a hassle, a waste of time.

Now?

Now it was the only chance Sakura had to think in peace and quiet.

She kept her thoughts light and loose, choosing not to ruminate on her anxieties and doubts. Instead, she completed her long drive home in easy, blissful silence.

Sakura climbed out of the car and grabbed a few packages from the back seat, smiling to herself. There was a secondhand store near the clinic where she worked and she had found quite a treasure trove.

“Sakura!” Zaku exclaimed, hastily hopping down from the fourth floor of their home.

Sakura watched, not even flinching at the heavy thud. She was used to the reckless abandon with which her roommates maneuvered themselves, even though it drove the doctor within her absolutely insane. “Hey Zaku!” she greeted in turn, accepting the arm he threw over her shoulder without complaint. “How were things here?”

“Same old, same old,” Zaku replied. “A couple of fights broke out and were resolved pretty quickly. Ashura and Indra’s spar got a bit out of hand and they destroyed one of the walls. Yamato repaired it without problem, good as new.”

Sakura frowned slightly, brows puckering. “They don’t usually roughhouse so much.”

Sakura could feel Zaku’s shrug through the arm around her shoulders. “I think they got a bit antsy because you stayed at the clinic overnight. No one outright said anything but tensions were higher than usual today.”

Sakura shook her head. “There was an emergent case yesterday afternoon that lasted past clinic hours. By the time everything was stable, I was too tired to drive home safely.”

“I know,” Zaku said. “I’m not chastising you, Sakura. Though you do know that any of us would have been willing to come by and pick you up.”

Sakura snorted, ducking her head against his shoulder. “I’ve seen you drive. I don’t trust any of you behind the wheel of a vehicle. And I wasn’t in the right headspace for the less conventional methods of travel that each of you offer.” She paused, clearing her throat. “How are you, Dosu, and Kin doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the news has picked up and started circulating stories of Orochimaru and his apparent activities. Are you concerned at all?”
Zaku rubbed at his neck, over the mark left on him by a childhood of experiments. “I don’t believe them. It’s just another tactic of fearmongering to try and score votes in the election. Orochimaru isn’t active. He can’t be. We’d know.”

Sakura watched him, wary. “You’re sure?”

“Sakura, the seal isn’t even active. Orochimaru isn’t active, at least in Pompeii. We’d know. Trust me.”

“I do,” Sakura replied, regarding him with sincerity.

Zaku hummed, dropping the matter to peer over her head instead. “So what’s this you got in your arms?” he asked, squeezing her slightly before releasing her fully. Zaku swept the stack of boxes away from her. “Parcheesi? Monopoly?” He sounded out the words with uncertainty, mangling the pronunciations. “Are these items of summoning from the other Planes? I have never heard of the entity Parcheesi, but the name is similar to those from the Plane of Limbo.”

Sakura paused, fighting to contain the peals of laughter that threatened to overwhelm her. She succumbed to the urge, releasing full-bodied, belly-aching laughter. Her legs wobbled and she leaned her weight against Zaku, trusting him. When she first met him, he was thin, malnourished, barely surviving off the land. Now, his limbs were strong and steady as he kept her propped up.

“Alright, I’ll bite; what are these things?” Zaku asked once Sakura reclaimed herself and took half of the games from him.

“These are board games,” Sakura said. “Tonight we will have all of the unhealthy snacks, play a ton of board games, and watch some terrible, hilarious horror movies. If we don’t wake up tomorrow with a sugar hangover then we did it wrong.”

“Oh and we can get Sai to make kettle corn!” Zaku said, nudging Sakura toward their home. “C’mon, c’mon, let’s get started!”

Sakura chuckled, feeling the weight of her exhaustion and responsibilities melt away in the face of Zaku’s excitement. “Alright, alright. Lead the way, Zaku.”

He bounded away ahead of her, yelling out for the rest of their roommates. Sakura followed at a slower pace, unsurprised to find everyone situated in the common room by the time she arrived.

“So Zaku said something about ‘board games,’” Yamato said, standing to greet her and take the boxes from her hands. “I’m afraid I am not very familiar with the concept.”

“Huh,” Sakura murmured. “I thought you might be the only one who would. Did you not play board games with the Senju?”

Yamato shook his head, following Sakura as she headed into the pantry to rifle for snacks. “I wasn’t allowed to play with the Senju.” His mouth curled with disdain. “Hashirama and Tobirama did not want me to ‘spread Orochimaru’s perversions.’ I did observe the Senju play Sorry quite often. They enjoyed the irony of built-in insincere apologies.”
Sakura snorted, shaking her head. “Why does that not surprise me?” She turned to Yamato, assessing him for a moment before placing a hand on his arm. “I’m glad we will have a chance to make some better memories about board games tonight.”

Yamato’s frown eased into a soft smile as he regarded Sakura in turn. “I am forever thankful for whatever good fortune there is in this world that allowed my path to cross with yours.”

Sakura’s breath caught in her throat as she held Yamato’s gaze, the intensity of his eyes drawing her in. She leaned forward, hand tightening on his arm to brace herself. Yamato lifted his free hand, carding his fingers through her hair. Sakura rolled up onto her toes, pressing a kiss to his cheek. She pulled away, flushing at the awe she saw lingering in the depths of his eyes. Sakura cleared her throat, smoothing her hand down his chest as she broke eye contact. She didn’t think she could withstand everything she could and could not read in his gaze.

“You know that I’m thankful too, right?” Sakura said, desperate to make sure he understood. She knew how little he valued himself and she wanted him to know the truth. “This relationship goes two ways. Having you in my life...I could not imagine my life without you. You are so integral to where I am now; who I am. Your presence in my life is as much a blessing to me as mine is to yours.”

“Sakura,” Yamato said, voice thick as he caught her around the waist and drew her near. He ran his other hand through her hair, cupping the back of her head as he angled her face up to his. Sakura didn’t dare breathe as she held his eyes, entranced. “I—”

“Sakura!” Ashura called, voice reverberating through the pantry. “Where are you? Kin is cheating!”

“Am not!” Kin yelled back. “Sakura, Ashura is being an asshole!”

Sakura and Yamato stared at each other for a moment, silent, before bursting into laughter. They drew away from each other reluctantly and returned to gathering snacks.

“I’ll be there in a moment!” Sakura shouted. “Try to resolve the situation like adults!”

“Fat chance of that,” Yamato said. “This bunch is more competitive and bloodthirsty than any of the Fae Courts, the Senju included.”

“Oh gods,” Sakura said, going pale.

Yamato watched her for a moment, snickering. “You didn’t think this through did you?”

“Listen, I’m a veteran of the Great Spoons War of ’11; I’m used to competition.” Sakura chewed her lip. “I just didn’t contemplate giving beings who are used to actual war and battle a new method to flaunt their skills.” She pressed a hand to her forehead. “Oh boy.”

Yamato hip-checked her, grinning when she stumbled before righting herself. “We’ll have fun. Stop worrying.”


The board games actually go over better than Sakura expected. While there are moments when things get out of hand (i.e., Ashura setting Kin’s hair on fire; Dosu making everyone’s ears pop), everyone really enjoyed the games. Some enjoyed them a bit too much, but those who weren’t as into the games had the Harry Potter marathon to watch instead.
Sakura was sprawled out on her stomach on the floor, legs tangled with Indra’s as they played *Settlers of Catan*. Yamato was a surprisingly ruthless conqueror and Kin was a late blooming upstart who threatened to topple his reign. Sakura was just scrambling to stay relevant in the game.

“This is not how the game of conquest plays out on the battlefield,” Indra said grumpily, scooting closer to Sakura.

“Really,” Sakura drawled. “It didn’t consist of rolling dice and earning sheep?”

Indra knocked his knee against her thigh. “I’m serious,” he said, though the joke eased the pucker of a pout from his face. “Conquest was all about strategy and meticulous planning. Not *luck*.”

“There was a little bit of luck involved,” Ashura chimed in from the table where he arm wrestled with Dosu. That had been a well-placed suggestion from Yamato to keep them from roughhousing.

Indra rolled his eyes. “Maybe for *you*, but mother and I actually planned out the conquest of Pompeii.”

Sakura rolled slightly, regarding Indra fully. “Conquest implies someone to conquer. Who was in Pompeii before you?”

“It wasn’t really a who,” Indra said. “In those days, the primordial forces were much more active. Their magics were young and vibrant and...alive perhaps? Not sentient by any means, but alive in its own fashion. The land defended itself from intruders. To live upon it, to be accepted by its magics, the land had to be conquered. So that is what we did.”

“You and the heroes who accompanied the Maiden,” Sakura said.

“Yes, my mother,” Indra replied, eyes softening as he reminiscenced.

“Did she...did she die in the conquest for Pompeii?” Sakura asked hesitantly, taking his hand.

“No,” Indra said, mouth firming in a scowl. He clung to her hand, folding his fingers through hers. “No, that came later. Pompeii was poisoned and turned upon its inhabitants. To save us, to save Pompeii, my mother made the most difficult choice, the final choice.” He sighed, squeezing her hand. “She didn’t even give us a chance to say goodbye. She knew we would’ve done everything in our power to stop her.”

“I’m so sorry Indra,” Sakura said, hearing the raw edge to his voice. Though it had been centuries, millennia even, since his mother’s passing, Sakura could tell he was nowhere near over it. “Death is always hard, especially when you aren’t allowed to say goodbye.”

Indra looked away, clearing his throat. “In any case, the conquest of Pompeii was a slow, steady build, a subtle masterpiece of tactics. Nothing like this drivel.”

“*Catan* isn’t ‘drivel.’ You’re just being a sore loser,” Kin said with a roll of her eyes.

Sakura felt Indra’s legs tense like he was preparing to pounce and she opened her mouth to deescalate the situation, when the doorbell rang.

Everyone turned to Sakura.

“Did any of you invite people over?” she asked, untangling herself from Indra to stand.

“Who would we have to invite?” Kin asked.
Sakura hummed, picking her way through the other bodies and scattered snacks toward the door. She wasn’t surprised when Sai sidled up behind her, offering silent support and protection should it be needed. Nevermind the fact that anyone with ill-intentions towards members of the home could not even enter the property.

Sakura checked the eyehole, blanching when she realized who was on the other side.

She hastily removed the charms and locks on the door, throwing it open to greet Tsunade.

“Sakura,” Tsunade greeted, crossing her arms. “May I come in?”

“I’ll step out,” Sakura said, nodding to Sai. He stepped back into the house, leaving Sakura alone with Tsunade. Sakura moved to lounge on the patio furniture, inviting Tsunade to join her. Tsunade took a seat gracefully, keeping her eyes trained on Sakura. “What brings you by this evening, Tsunade?”

“You’ve learned since you’ve arrived here,” Tsunade said.

“I beg your pardon,” Sakura replied, nonplussed by the non sequitur.

“You’ve wised up to the schemes of others. Once, you would have invited me inside without hesitation. Now, you refuse to let outsiders in, preserving the natural protections erected by lack of invitation. It is wise.”

Sakura frowned, a pang ringing clear in her heart as she contemplated the woman she once was when she arrived in Pompeii. She missed parts of that woman, the kindnesses she could afford before all of the betrayals. But Sakura knew she couldn’t go back to who she once was and, truth be told, she did not wish to. “Pompeii changes people, Tsunade, as I am certain you well know. Why are you here this evening?”

Tsunade huffed a laugh, shaking her head. “Much more direct than when we first met. I’m not sure if I appreciate it or not.”

Sakura shrugged. “I care little for your appreciation. I have not the time to worry for the thoughts of others.”

“So I see,” Tsunade replied, something similar to respect threading through her tone. She sighed, turning her gaze to the open night sky. “In any case, I am here to ask a favor of you.”

Sakura hummed to indicate that she was listening.

“Have you been paying attention to the election?” Tsunade asked, keeping her eyes skyward.

“How could I not?” Sakura asked bitterly. “This emergency election is inadvertently the result of my fight with Kaguya.”

Tsunade laughed slightly. “I’m afraid you’re giving yourself a bit too much credit. Certainly, your battle in the forest was the impetus that removed Minato from office, but it was not the catalyst. Minato has a history of wanton negligence; it was only a matter of time before he was deposed.”

“Yet his supporters have submitted a new candidate in his place,” Sakura said, leaning back to regard the night sky as well. It was easier to speak such harsh truths while she contemplated something cool and distant. “And Itama seems to be gaining ground rapidly.”

“It is hard to displace the centuries of intrigue and politics that put the Senju at the top,” Tsunade
said. “Even an incredible event like you striking down Kaguya is not enough to remove the claws of the Senju from their hold on Pompeii and its people.”

Sakura raised a hand to her throat, tracing over her scars there. “So, in your eyes, it was all for nought?”

“Not at all,” Tsunade said, startled as she redirected her eyes to Sakura. She cleared her throat, looking away again. “What you did...it changed the course of Pompeii, the course of history, irrevocably. Kaguya has lingered as a bad taste over the supernatural world for millennia. Sakura, you are the reason there is an influx of visitors and residents moving to Pompeii. You are the first God-Killer since the early years, when everything was chaos and destruction. There is no denying that your actions will have long lasting consequences.”

“You believe that Itama will win the race?” Sakura asked. “Despite the fact that he is such an obvious sock-puppet for his siblings?”

“Was not Minato the same?” Tsunade countered. “You were not here for his initial election, but I was. It was the exact same rhetoric that Itama now uses, the same fear-mongering that won him the seat in the first place. History repeats and the citizens of Pompeii are too myopic to realize it.”

“So you think Itama will win,” Sakura said.

“It is a distinct possibility,” Tsunade replied. “It’s more likely than I would care to admit.”

“That’s why you’re here today,” Sakura said, satisfied that she figured it out.

“It is. Itama, despite all the evidence laid at the feet of Pompeii’s citizens, is a strong candidate. People take comfort in that which they know and they know already what they would receive with a Senju in charge.”

“You’re Senju yourself,” Sakura couldn’t help but point out. “Why not couch your election with your family name?”

“I’ve long been separated from the Senju name,” Tsunade replied. “I chose to pursue the path of witchery, turning my back on the Fae heritage that was mine by birthright. I could no more use the Senju name than you could.”

“So why approach me about the election?” Sakura asked. “I do not have a family name that holds any clout.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Tsunade said with a smirk. “You may not hail from any known clan, but the title of ‘God-Killer’ holds more sway than you may think.”

“But that title isn’t even a sure thing,” Sakura said. “There are some who already doubt the events that unfolded in the woods.”

“They are fools,” Tsunade said. “And they will know. Soon.”

Sakura turned to stare at her. “What are you asking of me?”

“I would have you endorse me, explicitly and publicly,” Tsunade said. “Some of Pompeii has thrown your hat in the ring as a contender; your word is important to them. They will likely throw their vote behind whoever you yourself choose. To ensure that Itama does not take the mayoralship, I need your support.”
Sakura swallowed. She had a feeling that this might have been what Tsunade was fishing for and yet… “I’m not sure I can,” Sakura said, caressing her scars. “I don’t want to get involved in this election. Tensions are so high… I do not know if I can withstand another battle.”

“You are already involved,” Tsunade said with a hard voice, unable to show sympathy. “Your toppling of Kaguya is what landed Minato out on his ass; your actions tipped the scale. The people of Pompeii are outraged in your name; you are a deciding factor in this election whether you like it or not.” Tsunade stood. “You may not wish to support me; hell, I’d understand if you don’t, but you must choose someone. You must endorse someone or it is probable that Pompeii will fall to Senju rule once more.” Tsunade’s lips twisted. “And I doubt you would care for the treatment you’d receive from them.”

Sakura watched as Tsunade took her leave, an acrid taste coating her tongue.
It wasn’t the first time she had stayed up till 2 in the morning playing games, high as a kite on sugar and caffeine, and it wouldn’t be her last. As terrible as she felt, pulling herself up the stairs only to stumble onto her hands and knees the rest of the way, she couldn’t help the sleepy smile that tugged on her lips.

Sakura made it to her room and found her bathroom. She managed to right herself long enough to brush her teeth but not long enough to put away her toothbrush properly.

She’d get it in the morning.

Maybe.

Her bed was wide and soft with weighted blankets thick enough to get lost in, something Yamato and Sai had agreed on being a priority. Something about them being afraid of her not getting enough sleep?

Her brain was a mess. It was almost 3AM when she crawled across the mattress and felt the lump in her sheets. She poked at it and frowned when the lump moved, curling up tighter than before.

“Ashura,” Sakura whispered. She poked him again and he began to uncurl. “What are you doing in my bed, Ashura?”

“Tissss not your bed,” he mumbled into the blankets.

Sakura blinked and then glanced around, noticing the familiar decorations, lights, and photos on the walls. They were familiar, but they weren't hers.

“Oh no, sorry. My bad. I-oh I used your toothbrush too.” She felt her face heat up in embarrassment.

Ashura blinked, looking up at her through the curtain of his messy bed hair, left unbound around his shoulders. “It’s okay. It’s you. I...don’t mind.”

“I’ll get you a new one.” Sakura turned around and started crawling away when a hand on her ankle stopped her. Before she could glance back Ashura had tugged her back into the pillows and she fell with a flop.

“Wa-wait, wait! Where are you going?” Ashura sat up and crawled towards her. “You’re leaving?”

“Yeah, I need to find my bed, silly,” she said.

“Why?”

Sakura sat up and scratched the side of her head. “Cause this isn’t my bed. I made a mistake.”

“Yeah, but you don’t have to leave. It’s the whole wrong floor and you’re tired. Plus its dark.”

“So?”
Ashura rolled his eyes and moved aside some pillows. Sakura noted the great number he filled his bed with and felt a small stab of envy. Maybe she needed more pillows because it felt nice to have so many to squish.

“Well if it’s dark you might make the same mistake but with someone else. You’re tired so just crash here for the night. I’ll be on my best behavior and look, I have the best pillows.”

“You do have good pillows.”

As if to prove his point Ashura found one to put into her hands. She turned it over and grinned at the illustration of a fluffy alpaca wrapped up in Christmas lights. Ashura then held up his own pillow shaped like a cactus in a potted plant. The script at the bottom read ‘stuck on you’ in yellow cursive.

“I offered this one Zetsu but he said he didn’t need it. I don’t think he sleeps with pillows. It would be bad if you ended up in his bed.” Ashura leaned closer to whisper. “It’s a flower bed.”

Sakura snickered and hugged the pillow, still too tired to laugh as loud and full as she would normally for such a bad joke. Still, it was enough to get Ashura to smile.

“Fine, don’t mention this to the others though. They’d worry and next thing you know I’m getting escorted to bed each night like an invalid.” Sakura rolled her eyes at the thought.

“Don’t worry, I’m not mentioning this to any of the others. I don’t want them getting any funny ideas of their own,” he hummed.

Sakura pulled over a number of pillows and Ashura helped her assemble a nest for her before she snuggled in for the night. He had offered to cuddle with her but that only earned him a pillow shaped like Pikachu in the mouth.

“Can I at least hold your hand?” he whispered, laying down across from her, propped up on enough of his own pillows to see over her soft barricade.

Sakura slipped her hand out underneath one of the pillows and Ashura happily reached for it, making her chuckle.

“It’s just a hand,” she yawned. Her eyes slid shut and all the fog in her brain settled into something heavier. Within minutes she was asleep, hand still clasped with his.

“Not to me it isn’t.”

Ashura smiled to himself and squeezed her hand once more before turning over on his side and scooting as close to her wall of pillows as possible. He curled up and fell asleep watching her face.

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When Sakura woke in the morning it was actually the afternoon. Ashura was gone, but a note was left on the pillow closest to her head. She picked it up and held it up to the light to read. Most of the room was dim with all the windows drawn shut with heavy curtains, save for one.

‘Got up and made breakfast for when you’re ready. Your secret is safe with me.’

She turned it over once she noticed writing on the back.
Sakura snorted and folded the small paper into her hand. He was hilarious. In the light of a new day her decision to sleep in the same bed as Ashura probably wasn’t the wisest, but she had been too tired to know any better last night. He had been such a gentleman about it too. No wonder she trusted him and his brother so deeply.

The same could be true for Sai and Yamato, though she wasn’t sure they would all necessarily trust each other. Indra and Ashura were always bickering with each other it seemed, and while Yamato and Sai were close with one another, they antagonized fights out of their neighbors like it was an artform.

Sakura folded the note over again in her hand and sighed.

Getting up to her room was easy enough. It sounded like everyone was downstairs or out of the house, making the trip an uninterrupted one. Sakura took a shower on her own and dressed only to come out and hear the thunder of a mid day storm.

Her hair was wet, turning the fabric over her shoulders damp, but she left the towel behind. She pushed open the balcony doors and stepped out onto the patio where everything was dry in spite of the trickling rain.

More thunder rolled in the distance. *Familiar* thunder.

“*It wasn’t supposed to rain today,*” she said glancing up, eyes narrowed. “*Shit.*”

A heartbeat later the light in front of her shattered into a rainbow of stray colors before coming together again in the transparent image of a body. It shivered with the rainfall behind it as its background, before solidifying in color. Pein was standing on her balcony railing in a white tee shirt, black distressed jeans, and bloody knuckles.

“You can’t be here,” she said.

“I’m not.” Pein crouched down until they were nearly eye level with a good couple meters between them. “I’m just a reflection cast through the raindrops for you to see and interact with. I couldn’t touch a hair on your head if I wanted to.”

“Yeah, that’s on purpose.”

He regarded her a moment longer, form flickering with the unsteady medium. It was hard to make out details, but she saw the piercings and the quirk in the corner of his lips. He was dressed the way she remembered him, with the flavor of anarchy and the aura of a punk oozing from every pore. He was a wild god and maybe a mad one too.

“I’m glad. You are acknowledging how dangerous these people can be.”

“You’re not mad about being one of the people blocked out?” she asked.

“I’m flattered,” he chuckled, eyes creasing in the corners as he watched her through his watery reflection. “You are in your rights to do all this.”

“I know that.” Sakura almost reached for her neck but stopped herself. It was becoming a habit she needed to break. “What are you here for, Pein? It’s not just to see me.”

“It could be.”
Sakura leveled an unimpressed look his way.

“Clever girl. Yes, well,” he stood and turned to look out in the direction of Pompeii proper. “It’s getting pretty noisy around these parts. I’ve been away for a while and coming back, I was wondering if you knew about the whispers in your name.”

“Plenty of people have been dropping my name, that’s nothing for me to get worried about.”

“Not even the new arrivals? Pompeii is swelling with new magic like it hasn’t in centuries. You’re not concerned with the implications?”

“I take it from your tone I should be.”

Pein looked back at her and tilted his head to the side, watching her not unlike how a bird would watch something that sparkled in the light. His eyes were steadfast while the rest of him flickered with the water. But it didn’t scare her. Pein was terrifying and easily a terror of power with the ego to match, but she wasn’t afraid of him.

“I’ve been away too long, but my migration is at its end and I am here more fully. This mayoral race is not as simple as it presents itself to be. Do you feel the power in it?”

She shrugged. “I suppose that would be true for any shift in local government.”

Pein chuckled. “Not even close. It’s *Pompeii*, darling. What we allow to happen here will ripple out and touch the far corners of the world, like it or not. Are you going to stay inside and nurse your wounds forever?”

His words felt too much like Tsunade’s. Last night when she had stopped by to ask for Sakura’s support, Tsunade left Sakura with the impression that the time for hiding was over. It had been months since the fight and Sakura was still largely removed for Pompeii. The small events and celebrations went on and she stayed holed up in her house with her friends ignoring it all because that’s what was safest.

Sai told her about a drive in movie theater that just recently opened. It was a place that provided the cars for people to sit in, (as a good portion of Pompeii’s populace didn’t own a vehicle). The cars were a mismatched collection from all the different eras and ages that made the lot look colorful and vibrant if nothing else. The range of movies screened were just as varied. It sounded like tons of good fun. Yet Sakura hadn’t gone for the opening weekend or any other day after. She had never even seen the lot for herself.

Pompeii was her home but she was still hiding from it.

Sakura swallowed carefully and schooled her features back into something a bit more controlled. “I didn’t take you as the type to follow politics, Pein.”

He smirked in reply. “Never. I’m far more in favor of anarchy.”

“I think we’ve had enough of that to last us a while.”

“That? No, that wasn’t true anarchy. That was fear and tyranny; two things the fae in power know a bit too much about.”

“You have someone you’re supporting then?”

“We’ll see when the time comes. I’m sure I’d be able to bully my way through the squishy one just
fine, but the other women are solid forces of nature. Anyone who runs a witch coven or leads a mafia family would have to have a spine.”

“Wait, Mafia? What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, I thought you might know considering how close you were to her right hand, but Mei Terumī took over the Kiri syndicate from Yagura some time ago. He’s the old face who fronts the operation but Mei is the true power. Water types tend to be matriarchal.”

Mei’s concern with Orochimaru made more sense. He had last been spotted on Kiri territories and the water he polluted had harmed more than just Kisame and Zabuza. Haku’s ordeal with Orochimaru was also something to consider. If she was worried about him, did that mean Mei Terumī knew something about Orochimaru that the rest of Pompeii didn’t? Zaku hadn’t seemed concerned with the possibility, but what if… what if that was just naive thinking? What if they were wrong? What would the cost be?

“Do you think she has some valid concerns?” Sakura asked, glancing up.

“I’ve taken measures one way or another. It wouldn’t bother me.”

“That’s not an answer to my question, Pein.”

He shrugged. “Best I can do, love.”

“Is that all you came here to say?” Sakura asked, leaning back on her heels and crossing her arms over her chest. “I’m not as involved in this as you think I am. Coming over here was a waste of energy. It’s only a reflection you’re casting but to cross my barriers you have to be straining yourself. I find it hard to believe you didn’t come with some other ulterior motive.”

“You have strong allies.” His smirk grew as he drew himself up to his full height, towering over her from atop the balcony railing. “But I’m still stronger. Don’t worry for me.”

“I’m not worried.”

“You’re breaking my heart.”

“You have a heart?”

Pein’s eyes went wide and his smirk split open into a full smile followed by a deep belly set laughter. Far off behind him the sky tumbled through another roll of thunder that seemed to go on forever. Lightning jumped from cloud to cloud but nothing reached for the ground.

“Oh darling, don’t tease me so,” Pein chuckled, holding one side of his face as he regarded her anew. Like before, his whole form flickered with the rain except for his eyes which were steady on her. “I’ve missed this far too much. You make all time feel like an eternity.”

“You’re a god, you have eternity.”

“Yes, but it’s awfully lonely.”

“Sucks.”

He chuckled. ”Maybe it’ll not be so bad if I see your face around a little bit more.”

And then he was gone. Like he had never been there in the first place, the reflection cast through the water fell apart and Sakura was alone on her patio with wet hair and dry clothes watching the rain
dry up and clouds recede back into the sky.

- Sakura felt a little bit like her own mafia don as she stepped out of the car behind Ashura while Indra held the door open for her. It slammed shut behind her followed by either brother taking up a position at her left and right elbow, not exactly parallel and not exactly a full step behind either.

“I think it’s a little heavy handed,” Ashura said first.

“It’s practical,” Indra argued back.

Ashura scoffed. “More like tacky.”

“It’s not important,” Sakura sighed, interrupting the fight before it could start. “I would have walked into a crab-shack if that’s where we needed to go.”

“...Do they own one of those too?” Ashura asked after a moment.

Indra sighed but reached ahead to hold open the door for Sakura and his brother before following them into Poseidon’s Cradle, an upscale seafood restaurant that was never as busy as it needed to be to survive as a legitimate business. It hadn’t taken Sai long at all to find out for Sakura where she could find Mei and the bulk of her Kiri people.

Stepping into the dim lobby there were a number of tanks along the walls filled with simple but colorful fish. The hostess at the front looked up and smiled, preparing a trio of menus before recognizing Sakura and going stiff.

“You…” The woman’s eyes were wide the way Saura recognized.

“Mei should be expecting us,” Sakura answered boldly, knowing it was a half truth. Mei no doubt knew the three of them were coming, but Sakura wasn’t sure if the don would actually know to expect such a bold introduction.

The hostess, Tsunami, nodded. “I-she hadn’t mentioned it to me, but if you want you can wait here-no in the lounge off to the side and I’ll come back to bring you to her when she’s ready.”

Sakura followed Tsunami down a short hallway made out of glass walls lit from behind to make the rolling white waves painted down the length stand out all the more.

The hallway fed into a large lounge area with blush couches and chairs next to side tables, all facing the loft area. Sakura looked over the loft and saw what was probably the largest aquarium wall she had ever seen, stretching from the floor two stories down, to the loft ceiling. She saw a number of black tipped manta rays and sea turtles, but caught her breath when the speckled whale sharks drifted by.

“Stunning,” Indra hummed over her shoulder, watching the view beside her. He touched the small of her back and guided her into her seat while Ashura settled in ahead of her, grinning at the fever of large rays passing by.

Sakura felt a little numb as she watched the scenery. “Yes,” she softly agreed.
“One of the best views,” Indra murmured. But Sakura didn’t catch how his eyes were watching her instead of the tank, nor did she notice the way he seemed to shed his hard edges and grow soft for her-only for her.

He touched her shoulder and brushed a strand of pink curl back then moved away. Before sitting down on her opposite side Indra approached the railing and peered down, frowning at the scene below.

Sakura noticed his frown but it was Ashura who got up to ask. “What do you see?”

“Company.” Indra inclined his chin and sniffed. “Newcomers by the smell of it too. They still smell like the outside world.”

“There’s been a fair number of them,” Ashura said, watching the floor below them. “Where do you think they’re from. Looks like…”

“I only recognize the old man. His lineage is as old as it is notorious.”

“Someone to avoid?” Sakura asked, tearing her eyes away from the whales and sharks.

“For now.” Indra rejoined her side. “But if they are here it is not a pleasant sign. A is from the Raikage lineage, one nearly as long as ours.”

Ashura scoffed, leaving the railing to fall back into the seat beside Sakura’s. “Hardly!”

Indra rolled his eyes at his brother before facing Sakura. A conversation on inside voices would be had later but it would be as useful as holding water in a bucket without a bottom. Ashura was terrible at listening to his brother.

“Regardless, he’s sure to tangle with someone if he’s trying to move back into Pompeii. Like those from Kiri, A is the figurehead of his own…” Indra tilted his head to the side and smiled, pondering the word before speaking it aloud, “family, so to speak.”

Mafia family.

“That doesn’t sound good.”

Ashura snorted behind his hand. “Nope. What’s worse, a long time ago one of the Raikages tried to move in on Kiri’s turf, but this was way back when there were other heads in power, and it was nasty. We weren’t involved in any of it but you’d have to be blind to miss it.”

“With our limited awareness we were able to follow the order of events,” Indra clarified once he saw Sakura’s confused expression. “If they have returned and are bold enough to dine here, I don’t doubt they think they can start something new here.”

“As if Pompeii didn’t have enough of its own problems already,” Sakura sighed.

“It’s not your problem though,” Ashura said, reaching for her hand.

“And if it were,” Indra reached for her other, “we would take care of it without delay. Don’t forget who we are.”

She felt the warmth from both of them wrap her up like a hug. Sometimes she forgot the brothers were as ancient as they were powerful. Others might look on the set in awe, but all Sakura saw was a pair of brothers who never stopped arguing, except when it came to matters of her safety.
“I know.”

Sakura opened her mouth to say more but caught herself when she saw the change in Indra’s eyes. They flashed red like an Uchiha’s and beside her Ashura went tense, turning around to glare in the same direction as his brother.

“Slow down, Shī.”

“They said there was a lounge around here somewhere.”

A pair of males emerged the first one with bright blond hair and fair skin to contrast his dark eyes, while the other was a head taller with dark skin, black eyes, and shaggy white blond hair.

Emerging into the room the pair stopped short and Sakura saw the shorter one grin while his companion sighed, shoulders sagging.

“Not today, Shī,” the taller one exhaled under his breath.

The male named Shī just grinned and stepped forward, clearly ignoring his friend. “Can’t pass this up. I’ve been meaning to track down Pompeii’s last doctor.”

Ashura stood swiftly, blocking the way to Sakura while behind him Indra’s eyes twirled lazily, brilliant and deadly.

“That’s close enough,” Ashura said, keeping his hands loose at his sides.

“What a welcome,” Shī scoffed. “And here I was being friendly. I don’t mean anything mean by it. What do you think a doctor like me would do to a god killer?”

“Your face is an upsetting afront all on its own, so let’s not open that can of worms,” Ashura mocked with a smile.

“What a nasty man. It’s a public place. Let the professionals have a word why don’t you?”

“How about, no?”

“Touchy. Good thing I don’t care about you or red eyes. Hey, god-killer, is there a reason the doctor position isn’t up for grabs? I’d like to find some employment but can’t sweet talk that Shizune lady.”

God killer? Is that how the newcomers saw her? She then caught onto the other subject of his comment.

“You’re a doctor?” Sakura echoed.

The blond grinned and cut a subtle glare at Ashura before nodding. “One of the best, of course. I want your old job since you’ve all but abandoned it. What do you say?”

“Shizune is in charge of the clinic. You shouldn’t need to talk to me about that.”

“Yeah, but I feel like I have to. The lady ain’t budging or taking help. It’s like she thinks you’re going to come back or something. At least set her straight.”

“I don’t think I’ve left anything unclear with her. If you want the job so badly maybe you should earn it on your own instead of looking for a backway in.”
His brows both raised. “You saying there is something like that? What a dirty implication. I knew Pompeii had fallen apart a bit, but...”

His words drifted off into a chuckle that made Sakura bristle. She didn’t like the way he twisted his words, or the way he insulted her home. Pompeii had been unpleasant at times, but it was her home. Hers.

“This isn’t the time or place,” Indra cut in. “Leave before the consequences bite your Raikage in the ass.”

At the name drop Shī’s grin fell and the man beside him reached out to tug Shī back. The two shared a whisper before Shī nodded stiffly and turned back around to leave without another word. The taller man ran a hand through his hair and then nodded politely in their direction.

“I apologize for his behavior. We won’t disturb you any more than this. We have the intention of making a peaceful move to Pompeii but Shī can be…. boisterous.”

“Does he know what boundaries are?” Ashura asked, tone flat.

“We’d like to call him a work in progress.” The man fixed his eyes on Sakura who had watched the whole exchange without shifting her expression once. “My name is Darui. Next time I’ll introduce myself properly, along with my family.”

He turned and left before Sakura could respond or share her name. Not that it mattered, it sounded like they knew enough about her already.

“Interesting,” Sakura murmured, glancing back up at the tank. “I wonder how Mei is going to juggle keeping her family on top and the mayoral race.”

“You think she’ll stay in?” Ashura asked.

Sakura looked up but kept her lips together once she spotted the hostess Tsunami heading their way, looking a little frazzled. Sakura stood to greet her along with Indra.

“She’ll see you now. Le-let me take you to her table, this way,” said Tsunami.

Tsunami led them down a new hallway and them up a set of floating stairs to the highest level where a number of waterfalls fell from the ceiling to curtain in a secluded nook. Mei reclined at the table, looking over an iPad set next to her empty plate. The table was large enough to accommodate six to seven other guest with ease and it was set with enough courses to fill as many plates.

“Please, sit my friends,” Mei said, finally glancing up from her ipad. “I’ve been looking forward to this, Sakura Haruno.”

“Not god killer?” Sakura asked, taking the seat offered to her at Mei’s right hand side.

A server made out of water emerged from the waterfall to set up Sakura’s dish with a number of pre cracked snow crab legs, lobster rolls, and steaming greens.

“Nothing so singular,” Mei laughed. “Please eat, my treat. I like to have a good faith meal with my guests before beginning talks. I’ve been looking forward to this date almost as much as the look on Yagura’s face when I tell him what he missed out on.”

Ashura snorted behind his hand, dodging the side eye his brother sent.

Sakura glanced across the table and saw Indra already pulling apart a lobster tail with his silverware
while Ashura helped himself to a plate of sushi. She watched the brothers take a bite first before following their example. Mei’s table wasn’t enchanted or magic, which made sense. Yamato had once explained how fae’s tendency to trick or entice people with their food was an area of contention between the Senju clan and the Kiri. Members of the Kiri syndicate along with most other aquatic based locals saw food as a necessity and viewed those who enchanted meals as the lowest of the low.

A few bites in and Sakura began to melt. “It’s delicious,” she said, holding a napkin up to her lips. “Please pass on my compliments.”

“Of course,” Mei laughed.

A half hour later everyone was leaning back with full bellies while the water sprites cleaned away their dishes from the table. Once they were alone again Mei leaned forward onto the edge of the table.

“Can I guess why you’re here or would you like to tell me?” she asked Sakura.

“I think you want to guess.”

Mei’s grin grew. “You’re terribly cute and I’m weak for clever girls. No doubt Tsunade already visited you. Did you want to ask me about my platform?”

Sakura shook her head. “I’ve watched enough television to pick that out myself. But that’s not why I’m here. Besides, I don’t think you’re staying in the race.”

Mei blinked. “Oh?”

“You’re not as aggressive with the campaign and it would distract you from the rest of your family too much. With new and old faces alike moving into Pompeii, I’m sure you have your own priorities that hit closer to home.” Sakura watched Mei’s smile stretch. “How am I doing so far?”


Sakura swallowed. “Orochimaru.”

Mei’s smile fell into something more reserved as she nodded and sat back. “We can be ruthless but that snake is cruel. In addition to my concerns with new neighbors, we’re hearing his whispers on the water again.”

“You’re sure?” Sakura asked, remembering Zaku’s comments.

Mei nodded. “If he’s not back now it’s only a matter of time before he fully manifests in Pompeii once more. We’re preparing ourselves for that.”

“Your lands are where he was last seen. Yamato chased him here and then after that…” Sakura glanced across the table to where Indra and Ashura both sat. “No one wanted to believe he could come back.”

“We are a long lived people, or most of us are, but not immortal. We all have our own sunsets yet the white snake would seek to subvert the natural order entirely. His fear is understandable but not forgivable, not when he endangers my children,” Mei said, watching the waterfalls before turning her eyes back to Sakura. “I don’t have proof of his return, only my word and my feelings. Is this what
“I have people in my family who I won’t see harmed by him ever again. If he’s coming back, I want to know,” Sakura answered.

Her words must have pleased Mei. The expression on the older woman’s face was subtle, but her single, visible eye, creased pleasingly. It was an expression Sakura recognized.

“We have an expression here in Kiri; family first. No matter what, family first. I can understand your resolve and will pray for the fates to favor you and your house. For me and my own, we will be mindful of his movements should they be witnessed. I am prepared to share this information with you in exchange for the same.”

“The same?” Sakura echoed.

“You have some of his poor cast offs in your family. Should they feel his magic, let us know.”

Sakura felt a shiver of unease in her spine. “To what end?”

“You weren’t here the last time he made a mess so you wouldn’t understand, but your children, your friends and family, no matter who they were before, once their marks take over they become something else. You’re playing a dangerous game inviting them into your carefully warded home.”

The unease raced up and down her spine. “I won’t cast them out if that’s what you’re insinuating.”

Mei watched Sakura a moment longer before her shoulders sagged.

“Then make yourself ready for what is to come. I won’t judge you for your decision, but I can’t condone it in good faith. Orochimaru is a monster for what he has done to those people and you can not begin to understand the truth of it until-” Mei’s throat tightened and Sakura saw something odd flash in the woman’s single, visible eye. When she spoke again her voice was tight and sounded far off. “Until it’s your own child, wild in your arms, trying to tear your throat out. Make yourself ready, Sakura.”

Far across Pompeii, on the opposite side of the town, Kin stood in front of her mirror, gripping the edge of the sink until her knuckles turned as white as porcelain. Her eyes were rimmed in red and her lashes were still wet as she willed the crawling black marks backwards, behind the broken seal once more.

She wasn’t going to fall apart again.

Not again.

Never again.

Chapter End Notes

I...really like Kiri. And I want that aquarium.

The first bit with the sharing the bed trope was one I really enjoyed and it might be my
favorite scene to date. But yeah what are some of the classic fiction tropes you get all mushy for. I'm big on bed sharing and snuggles (so buckle up because this won't be the last time this happens!) but there are so many good ones. I'd love to hear what you guys are dying to see/read in Pompeii.

Thank you for all the love and support.
Chapter 56

Chapter by Vesperchan

Chapter Notes

Chapter by the lovely jaylene!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sakura felt deja vu bent over the thick textbook, poring through the pages. This was just like the innumerable occasions she spent scant years ago, giving herself stress migraines as she stayed up to all hours of the night studying medical books. It was a bit different this time, she doubted she would ever read anything about the step by step process of utilizing a seal to prevent possession.

Though, truthfully, the esoteric, academic language was much the same.

“Find anything yet?” Naruto asked. He tapped out of research about an hour ago, a cool washcloth over his eyes. Sakura wondered if they needed to schedule a visit to the optometrist for him. It might be good to get Naruto and probably even Karin out of Pompeii for an outing, even if only for a day.

“Some interesting notes on preventing possession of inanimate objects, but nothing on sealing curses,” Sakura said with a sigh, closing the book and picking up a scroll. She looked at the incredible disarray around them, precarious piles of books and scrolls. “Are you sure it’s alright for you to bring these here? I’m not exactly the favorite person in the Uzumaki household…”

Karin snorted, shaking out her hair. “That’s politics for you. They dislike you because your words and actions threaten the image they’ve curated in town.” Sakura glanced at Naruto, wondering if he would be insulted on his parents’ behalf. He stayed in place, shoulders relaxed. “Aunt Kushina and Uncle Minato will get over it at some point and if they don’t, that’s their problem. It isn’t your issue. You can’t control what they think of you.”

“I know,” Sakura replied with a sigh. She remembered when she first walked back into town after the battle with Kaguya, the mistrust and disgust in almost every Pompeii citizen’s eyes after she fought and nearly died for their sakes. And they just didn’t care. “I know. It’s hard to live in the reality of it when I’m confronted with it on a daily basis.”

“We have a right to these books,” Naruto said. “We haven’t been disinherited; we’re still viable heirs to the Uzumaki. Mom might not be happy that we’re sharing the books with you, but she can’t stop us.” He smiled, embodying his kitsune nature for a moment. “And it isn’t like we told them.”

Sakura laughed just as Naruto intended, hiding her face for a moment in the cradle of her arms. She knew it wasn’t really that funny, but she was giddy; high on a lack of sleep, overindulgence in caffeine and sugar, and the search for knowledge.

“I think I found something that will work,” Karin said softly.

The levity in the room faded into solemnity, as both Sakura and Naruto sat up to look at Karin. Karin fiddled with her glasses, a frown tugging at her lips.

“What did you find?” Sakura asked.
“It’s a bit unorthodox,” Karin warned. “What I’ve found is a ritual that seals a person’s powers. Generally, it’s used for adolescents who struggle with their powers, as their heritage usually starts manifesting at that age. The sudden appearance of powers can lead to accidents, so this seal allows for a slow release of power over time.”

“Okay,” Sakura said with a slow nod. “What will that look like in action?”

“It’d seal away all of the person’s powers, both those that come from the curse mark and those that come from their heritage,” Karin replied, staring at the ground. “It’s...well, I’ve never seen it used with adults before. So I’m not sure about potential side effects...”

Sakura thought of Kin, Dosu, and Zaku, their life spent as transients on the edge of society, feared for something beyond their control. Living in constant fear of becoming the monsters everyone thought them to be.

“We ask them,” Sakura said firmly. “No bullshit or obfuscating of the facts. We just tell them the truth and take it from there. If they want to try this, then we try it out.” Sakura hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. “If they don’t, we keep searching.”

Naruto sat up, taking the book from Karin. He flipped through the pages, a frown creasing his brows. “This won’t work for Dosu and Zaku.”

“Why not?” Karin said. “It worked for you and Menma.”

“It’s not a gender thing,” Naruto replied with half a chuckle. He sidled up alongside his cousin, gesturing to a specific paragraph. “Take a look at this. It requires the powers to be active; it’s why people aren’t sealed as infants. Their powers have to be an active agent for containment.”

Karin hissed an expletive. “That is going to be a problem. If we sealed people who have an inactive curse, it would only contain their own inherent powers. It might even be the sort of event that would reactivate the curse and allow it to completely consume them.”

“So, this won’t work for Zaku and Dosu, at least, not yet,” Sakura said. “We’ll have to keep searching for them. But this might be a solution for Kin, no matter how temporary.”

Karin sighed, looking around at the few books and scrolls they hadn’t read. “We’ll need to find a different source for information; we’ve taken everything we could from the Uzumaki libraries.”

Sakura took note of that, scribbling it down into her planner. She would do anything in her power to make sure that her friends could live safely, could sleep easy at night. “If needed we can reach out to Kiri and if that doesn’t pan out, we can try the Uchiha. We’ll keep searching until we find an answer.”

Karin smiled at that, getting to her feet and ruffling Sakura’s hair affectionately before heading to the door. “Let’s go let Kin know.”

They found Kin in her bedroom, reclining listlessly on an overstuffed chaise. She was dressed in a tank top and sweats, her hair loose and oily. Sakura’s heart sank as she took in the waxy and pale quality to Kin’s skin, a stark contrast to the roiling black flames that crawled along her neck and arm restlessly. The mark seemed a living beast, leaking past the former unbroken circle of a seal, snapping its jaws at every sign of weakness, and trying to consume Kin from within. From everything Kin said about the mark, it was a constant struggle to keep it from spreading further.

When Kin realized they were there, she forced herself up, scrambling to rearrange her hair into a tidy fashion. Her eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed, with dark bags revealing how poor her sleep was.
“What brings you by?” Kin rasped.

Sakura moved to support Kin, placing an arm around her.

“We may have a solution,” Karin said softly, kneeling to meet Kin’s glassy eyes. “We don’t know all of the side effects though.”

Kin listened intently as Karin detailed out the plan, but Sakura could tell there were moments where she drifted away. With her arm around Kin, Sakura could feel the movement of the curse, the flames icy beneath her touch. The rest of her skin was overheated, feverish. Sakura rubbed Kin’s bare arm, trying to offer some measly comfort to the poor woman.

“So it’ll seal away all my powers?” Kin asked. “Everything else is unknown?”

“That’s the gist of it,” Sakura said. “We can keep searching for other options—”

“No,” Kin interrupted, shaking her head. “It’s only been three days since the curse reactivated and I’m exhausted. The moment I take a break, the moment I rest…” The flames along her shoulder and arm spiked and grew, thrashing angrily as Kin’s voice rose with emotion. “The curse takes another limb.” She reached down, entangling her hand with Sakura’s and squeezing hard. “I can feel my mind slipping; I’m losing moments, minutes of time before coming back to myself. I come back to myself in another location, absolutely enraged and ready to attack, to rend to pieces…” Kin shook her head. “What happens when I slip away for a longer period of time? When I can’t come back to myself? Do the procedure; the consequences can’t possibly outweigh the ones we’re already experiencing.”

“Alright,” Karin said. “Alright. Naruto and I will go get things prepared. Kin, you’ll need to take a purifying bath, Naruto will bring the necessary supplies.” She snorted at the disbelieving looks leveled on her by Sakura and Kin. “Listen, I didn’t make this ritual; it’s possible that the purifying bath is nonsense based on tradition, but I think it’s best not to risk it. This is the way the ritual was completed for Naruto and Menma back in the day and it worked then.”

“Fair enough,” Kin said with a shrug before smirking. “Still bullshit.”

“I agree,” Karin replied, before tossing her hair in a decidedly snobby manner. “You could use a bath though.”

“Whatever you say bitch,” Kin said, standing shakily with Sakura’s assistance.

“Love you too, whore,” Karin replied.

Sakura laughed at their odd friendship, watching as the Uzumakis made themselves scarce to complete their tasks. Sakura watched as Kin started making her way toward her bathroom, swaying from side to side. “Would you like some assistance?” Sakura asked.

Kin turned to look at her, flushing slightly. “Yeah,” she ground out, hating to appear weak.

Between the two of them, they managed to make it into the bathroom and get most of it set up. Sakura fiddled with the bathtub faucet as Kin leaned heavily against the counter.

Kin’s bathroom was kitted to the nines, the walls painted in pale silver tones, the frame of the mirror a mosaic of Kin’s own design, done in soft silvers and golds. The flooring was smooth marble shot through with veins of pink and gold. The most impressive thing though was the ceiling, a hand-painted mural that Kin, Karin, Naruto, and Sakura spent months working on. The main colors were silver, gold, and bright blue, with each of the house residents painted in. It was by no means a
professional painting, Sakura wasn’t a phenomenal artist, though Karin, Kin, and Naruto had surprisingly artistic eyes. But it had a lot of heart in every brushstroke and every figure bore a clear resemblance to who they meant to represent.

“Want the water hotter or colder than this?” Sakura asked, touching Kin’s hand with her wet one.

“Hotter. Much hotter. Turn off the cold tap; I’ve been freezing since the curse activated,” Kin said.

Sakura pursed her lips, knowing the adverse health effects of scalding water but restraining herself. Kin’s physiology was adapted to the heat thanks to the curse.

A knock sounded on the door. “Sakura?” Yamato called.

Sakura glanced at Kin, before moving to the door. “What is it, Yamato?” she asked, opening the door slightly.

Yamato raised the gifts he came bearing, the supplies that Naruto was commissioned to bring. When Sakura quirked a brow in question, Yamato grinned. “Naruto was drafted to assist Karin in creating the ritual circle; something about needing his chaotic enthusiasm. So I come in his place.”

Sakura took the items from him with a word of thanks. Yamato stopped her with a hand on her wrist, eyes soft.

“What can I do to help?” he asked.

Sakura glanced askance at Kin, contemplating. What else could be done? This ritual would hopefully get Kin’s curse under control for the time being and they would continue to search for a more final solution. Dosu and Zaku were alright for now and hopefully a solution would materialize for them too...

“What about the other cursed individuals?” Sakura asked softly, almost to herself.

“Others?” Yamato repeated.

“There are others who bear the curse,” Sakura said, thinking about Juugo. “Kin and the others have mentioned it before; hundreds of people in the experimental facilities that Orochimaru ran.” Yamato’s eyes darkened with painful understanding. “Most ended up on the streets after Orochimaru was exposed. Kin, Zaku, and Dosu are here but others…”

“They’re still out there,” Yamato said. He scrubbed a hand over his face, drawing Sakura’s attention to the scruff lining his jaw. “It will be hard to find them; they won’t want to be found. They’ve been taught by experience that they are the unwanted; it’s safer to go unseen.”

“But?” Sakura said, hoping for more.

Yamato smiled, rubbing his thumb along the pulse point of Sakura’s wrist. “But I know how they think. I know how it feels to be maligned for being subjected to Orochimaru’s machinations; I’ve been in that headspace.” He met Sakura’s gaze with a fierce passion that stole her breath. “I also know that your reputation will be good among them; you’ve a habit for bringing in outcasts and strays. I’ll speak with Sai and the Otsutsuki brothers; we’ll get a patrol rotation going.” He lifted Sakura’s hand, turning it palm up so he could press a kiss to the fragile skin of her wrist. “I’ll see you later tonight.”

Sakura was left standing in the doorway, off-kilter and flustered. She shook herself out of it, turning back toward Kin who watched her with knowing eyes. “Shut up,” Sakura said.
Kin cackled at that, throwing back her head and displaying the black flames of the curse. “I don’t have anything to say,” she said slyly. “After all, your face says everything.”

Sakura felt her blush deepen but she valiantly ignored it, instead focusing on the items in her hands. “Guess we’re starting with the magic bath bomb.”

“Aren’t all bath bombs magic?” Kin quipped.

Sakura laughed, feeling like a weight was lifted. Things still weren’t sorted, not entirely, but Kin was still herself. And Sakura would fight to keep it that way. “Let’s get started then.”

“It is good to see you well, Sakura,” Izuna said warmly, pouring her a cup of hot tea. “You seem in better health these more recent visits.”

Sakura took the cup gratefully, casting Izuna a bright smile. “Things are going well,” she said. “The rumor mongering surrounding the election is calming down somewhat, though I can’t go anywhere without being called ‘god-killer.’” Sakura rolled her eyes.

“Are you being harassed?” Izuna asked, smile falling away into an almost unrecognizable mask of anger. “Still? They’ve been warned…” Izuna’s eyes turned red, irises whirling angrily. “Who was it?” He made a piercing caw, undoubtedly a tengu expletive.

“I’m not being harassed!” Sakura said. “No more than usual, certainly. Especially since the incident with Kaguya. Few people approach me when I’m out and about; really it’s just been intrusive questions.”

Izuna settled somewhat, though his eyes flashed brighter for a moment. “Let me know if you need to file any restraining orders,” he said tightly. “The police department will not tolerate any violations to your safety.”

“Thank you, Izuna,” Sakura replied softly, touched as always by his kindness. Of the Uchiha, he was the one that Sakura trusted the most. Which was why she was here today. “Izuna, I have a favor to ask of you.”

Izuna straightened up in his seat, smiling at Sakura. “I would be happy to help you in any way I can.”

Sakura took a moment to sip from her teacup, assessing Izuna. He’d mentioned her health, but truthfully, this was the healthiest she’d seen him. In the time leading up to the Kaguya ordeal, he started assuming more authority over the police force, now acting as the leader of the Uchiha corps. Leadership suited him well, a mantle of power he wore easily around his shoulders. Yet his gaze was still warm with affection for her, unchanged by recent events in both their lives.

“This is lovely tea,” Sakura said. “I’ve appreciated the blends you’ve been leaving me.”

Izuna didn’t startle, but his eyes widened ever so slightly. “What do you mean?”

“Your birds have been leaving bits and babbles at my residence since I moved here,” Sakura said. “I never keep the...expensive bits, but I take the inexpensive shinies and flowers. In recent months they’ve been leaving home-blended loose leaf teas, which always have floral flavors that reflect your flower arrangements.” Sakura nodded toward the arrangement in the corner, specifically the lavender florets that provide a splash of color. “There’s lavender in this blend and in the one I received a few days ago. I’m not bringing this up to put you on the spot,” Sakura continued, catching the flush along his cheeks and ears. “I just wanted to say thank you. The teas are absolutely delicious, I usually drink them when I can’t sleep or when I’m starting the day.”
“I--of course,” Izuna said, clearing his throat. “It’s a small thing; I always make blends for myself so it was easy to just make a little extra.”

“It was kind,” Sakura said firmly, not wanting him to downplay it. “I really do appreciate it.”

“Of course,” he said. “What was that favor?”

“We’re looking for people experimented on by Orochimaru,” Sakura said, keeping her voice even. She was a player in the politics of Pompeii now, like it or not and she was going to play it well. “You know already that our territory houses individuals who were hurt by Orochimaru’s actions. We want to assist the others. Most likely they are transients in Pompeii, probably have a record with the police.”

Izuna frowned, topping off both their teacups. “Certainly, most of the homeless population in Pompeii have former ties to Orochimaru, but what does that have to do with the police?”

Sakura leaned forward. “I know that our former mayor instituted rather strict policies regarding panhandling and trespassing, designed nearly for the sole purpose of criminalizing homelessness.” Sakura’s lip curled at that, but she didn’t speak her opinion. “I know things are up in the air right now with the mayoral election, but I would ask that you direct those you come across our way. We’ll do what we can to help them.”

Izuna eyed her, solemn and tense. “I’m not sure what sort of game you’re playing here, Sakura, but you won’t earn any friends.”


“That’s true enough,” Izuna said, relaxing somewhat. “I will do what I can to assist in this endeavour. Come, let’s move on to lighter topics. How go the renovations?”

Sakura relaxed in turn, engaging in easy conversation for the next hour or so. It was nice catching up with Izuna, though most of their talk skimmed across the surface level of depth. It was a break from the general heaviness of Sakura’s day to day at the moment and she truly appreciated it.

They parted as the sun was setting and Sakura made her way through the Uchiha forest, appreciating the solitude. Of course, she wasn’t truly alone, there were plenty of corvids following her at a distance.

So Sakura was understandably surprised to be accosted by visitors who were rapidly becoming her least favorite tourists.

“God killer! What a surprise! And so soon after our first encounter. Can’t keep yourself away?” Shī asked, giving Sakura a smarmy smile.

Sakura felt the urge to punch out his perfect teeth. “I am heading home; you’re the ones making an approach.” Sakura raised her eyebrows. “Have business with the Uchiha, do you? First Kiri and now the Uchiha; you certainly move fast.”

For the briefest of moments, Shī’s smile fell away and Sakura felt a rush of vindication.

“I’m not sure what you’re speaking of,” Darui said, voice deep and slow, each word planned out in advance. Sakura could tell that he was the brains of their little duo and probably held more power in their “family.” “Shī and I are merely taking a stroll; tensions are high in town with the upcoming elections.”
Sakura gave them her best customer smile, utterly meaningless and nigh unbreakable from her time spent as a doctor. “I hope you have a lovely time, enjoy the air. Be careful though, you are technically trespassing on Uchiha land and they tend to be territorial. I need to head home; I have dinner plans.”

Shī stepped in her path. “Why don’t we accompany you? We’re heading the same way and it just isn’t safe to travel alone.”

Sakura barely contained a snort at the absolute gall of this man. “I do not require accompaniment. First, we weren’t heading the same way; we were going in exactly opposite directions. Second, you’re a little late on that safety issue, could’ve used that a few months ago.” Sakura arched her brows. “But now? Well, I’m the god killer; I’m safe on my own. You on the other hand…”

“Is that a threat?” Shī asked.

“Just an observation,” Sakura replied, setting off down the path. She knew Shī would feel insulted by the blatant disrespect of receiving her back. “Careful about your actions here in Pompeii; that lack of subtlety can land you in a world of trouble.”

There was the sound of a sudden scuffle and Shī releasing an expletive. Sakura turned, catching sight of Shī being held by Itachi and Shisui. From Shī’s position, it seemed likely that he was trying to approach Sakura, only to be restrained by the Uchiha cousins.

Sakura shook her head, glancing up at the corvids in the trees before looking back at Shisui. She refused to look at Itachi. “Give Izuna my thanks for the assistance.” She met Darui’s eyes. “Watch that recklessness; it won’t get your family far in Pompeii.” Sakura looked finally at Shī, who watched her balefully. “You want the truth about me? Keep harassing me. You’ll figure out quick just how I came by the moniker ‘god killer.’”

So saying, Sakura walked away, paying no mind to their attempts at responding.

“I’ve been looking forward to seeing you again, Sakura.”

Sakura turned, smiling as she met amber eyes. “Utakata!” she greeted, distracted by the bubbles that floated around the man. He was seated on a bench, kimono effortlessly elegant as he blew into his pipe. “Seems you’ve finally come to Pompeii!”

He smiled, mellow and languid. “Time is an odd construct for beings as long lived as we are. We might be beyond the mortality it brings, but we are still slaves to time in the end. I arrived here when the time was right.” Sakura took a seat beside him as he took up his pipe again. The bubbles he blew glittered with iridescence and gold, an ordinary magic that was captivating. The bubbles shone with an inner light. “You’ve certainly been busy in the short time of our separation. Quite a bit of upheaval.”

Sakura glanced askance at him, trying to figure out if he was trying to insinuate that she was the cause.

“This has been a long time coming,” Utakata said. “Started centuries ago with the very founding of Pompeii. Pompeii is forever slow to change, but change, like time, is forever constant. It’s been building and building beneath the surface, only to reach the boiling point upon your arrival.” Utakata breathed out and bubbles poured from between his lips, joining those already in the air. None had popped so far, swaying back and forth like buoys in the water. “You may be a coincidence or a catalyst, but rest easy knowing this was coming one way or another. Change waits for no one, mortal or otherwise.”
“Huh,” Sakura said. “And what happens now?”

“Now?” Utakata repeated. “We watch how that change is shaped. There’s a reason so many are coming to Pompeii now, wishing to claim a piece during this upheaval. Be wary of those around you, both old faces and new. The promise of power is a siren’s call that few can overcome.”

“And you?” Sakura said. “What’s your angle in all this?”

Utakata smiled, eyes shutting. “I’m here as a spectator of sorts. I have no true angle in this; I’m a storyteller. I’m supposed to be unbiased but…” Utakata’s eyes opened again, pinning her in place with the force of his gaze. “Well, I know who I would see the victor; the shaper of the story. I suppose it isn’t too much of an issue, all storytellers have their favorites. And this story?” The bubbles around them brighten, the light within intensifying. “This promises to be one hell of a story.”

The bubbles pop, leaving them bathed in the natural light of the moon and stars.

Utakata stood, offering his hand to Sakura. She took it and he pulled her to her feet. He drew her in close, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I look forward to all you do, Sakura. It will undoubtedly shake the very foundations of our magical world.”

Chapter End Notes

It's midnight somewhere~

Works inspired by this one

a series of not-so-unfortunate events by 0shadow_panther0

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