Stray Thoughts

by Bulldango

Summary

Her light destroyed, Sakura now finds herself on a path she never thought she'd take, that of a missing-nin. Rumors of her status are spreading, and one organization has taken notice. DeiSaku

Notes

A/N Thanks for joining me today! I've finally decided to get to work and give back to the pairing I love to read. I hope I can give you all something to enjoy. My goals with these stories are try to stay out of some popular tropes and clichés I see with AkatsukimemberxSakura fics, especially the DeixSaku ones. I do have a plot and an endgame in mind, and I hope to make it there in 20 chapters or so. I'll really be pushing myself to finish this story. I'm sorry if it's a slow start!

As for backstory that you may need to know, this story branches off from the manga after Gaara has had Shukaku extracted and Gaara revived. Sasori is never killed by Sakura and Chiyo, he is simply forced into a retreat.
Stray Thoughts

Sakura's boots were wearing thin, her hair was dry and limp, her lips cracked, her eyes weary but at least she was alive. Or had some semblance of it. She was currently trekking through the land that bordered between Kusagakure and Takigakure, though a bit too close to the Land of Fire for her. Sakura couldn't help but feel slightly unnerved as the tall grass towered over her head. She gave a soft sigh as she amended that it was tall enough to shield her from the harsh afternoon sun. A firm breeze rustled the grass, the sound like a thousand paper cranes let loose on the wind as the grass bowed and waved around her. She was given a brief glimpse of the expansive landscape surrounding her as the grass dipped and ebbed. The beauty was lost on her.

There would have been a time where this sight would raise her heart, make her feel alive and free. It would make her smile as the overwhelming urge burst through and she ran through hidden sanctuary. Sakura was beyond that girlish charm. Instead she simply walked on after sparing a few seconds to glance back down the trail she had left in the grass. Like a snake through the corn field, she trudged on. For once in what seemed like a very long time, Sakura let her mind wonder, finally feeling a bit more at ease now that she was far away from any type of settlements. She couldn't help but feel a sense of disgust well up in her throat as through some introspective thoughts she came to loathe what she had become. A coward.

Worse than trash.

In all of her life she didn't think this would be where she'd end up, what she'd become, what would become of her. It was only three years ago it seemed that she was destined for greatness, for a welcoming, warm life.

'How naive I was. How stupid and idiotic. All the signs were there, plain as day.' It was going to be a bad day for Sakura, regardless of the natural splendour that surrounded her or the perfect weather the skies had graced her with today. She stopped suddenly, her current train of thought dropped in lieu of thinking about how cruel her fate had been. Sakura looked skyward, almost as if searching for the Kami who wiped her predetermined destiny from the board and substituted this existence in its place. She felt as if she was a prop in the background of some hero -or villain's- story, that that is what she had been her entire life. Her existence didn't matter beyond filling a plot point in someone else's destiny.

'Did I fill my purpose? Am I cast to the side now? Does my story not warrant its own ending? No, I will end this story, even if that ending is tomorrow.' Sakura's head dropped in grim determination, a single lock of pink hair drifting across her unfocused gaze. She gained some solace in the fact that she now seemed to be in control of her own destiny, no longer tangled in the threads of the Ninja worlds politics, of the ever looming war about to burst on the horizon. A life on the run was not a pleasant one, but the upsides it had were staggering in the freedom they brought to her tired soul. Sakura had freedom of choice, something that she had some to realize had only ever been an illusion when she was tied to Konoha.

But it also came with crippling self-responsibility.

She could no longer rationalize her actions by simply blaming it on her village, her Hokage or her team leader. Sakura was forced to accept that she killed others by her own free will. It was by this free will killing that Sakura's notoriety had grown. While it had taken upwards of six months for the news of her survival to spread once she had defected, it had spread quickly, but quietly. It seeped through the underworld of the ninja world, trickles here and there, but no-one ever quite pinpointing the origins. It had been another full year of nothing but whispers and rare sightings before Sakura breached more fully into this untapped resource that was illegal shinobi dealings.
Sakura had to admit, it was a steep learning curve for her. For starters, she had never even known something like it even existed outside of small enclaves of civilian black markets, it was not something that she had ever been informed about. It seemed like it was definitely a blank spot in the academy curriculum. Sakura could only guess it was a dirty secret for most of the Hidden Villages, something swept under the rug so as to not dishonour their noble shinobi. Couldn't let the civilians know that they were just as bad as they were, if not worse.

It was because of this illicit underworld that Sakura was able to stay afloat in this turbulent new world. Jobs were picked up, money -as well as gossip- was traded for goods and services. A simple henge to alter hair and eye colour was all Sakura needed to flit around as she liked in the illegal boondocks without having her location noticed. That fact that she was a young, attractive Leaf kunoichi did not go unnoticed, it was an unusual sight, however she needed to keep some semblance to her actual identity so that she could maintain her connections easily.

Sakura's head snapped to look back through the grass from which she came, her body turning slightly to allow for the movement. A graceless gust of wind rushed up through the path she had left behind, billowing up from her feet. Her vertically striped travelling cloak ruffled with the breeze, the left side folding back to reveal Sakura's hand reaching into her pouch to retrieve a Kunai. The flare-up caught beneath her sandogasa, tousling the pink locks around her face. Her short ponytail should have been tighter, neater; Shikamaru would be disappointed that his style had been so carelessly impersonated.

'Heh, Shikamaru, I wonder if he's alive. Probably not.' Was Sakura's last thought before she dropped to a knee, the gentle 'whiph' of an Odachi sweeping over her head. The Kunai grasped tightly in her hand was let go following her clean drop, but it did nothing but pierce through a haze of mist.

'Fucking Mist nins with their fucking Kiri-Shunshin and their fucking bullshit Silent Killing Technique.' Sakura swore mentally in aggravations, though silently thanking Kakashi from his strict regimen that trained her to be able to counter such a devastating technique. However, now was not the time to be thinking of Sensei's past or she'd be reuniting with him sooner rather than later.

The swipe of the Odachi came again, but from the back, this time. The blade sought to behead her quickly, but Sakura had already moved from the long range of the towering weapon. Sakura kept low, eyes gazing back at her opponent. The Mist kunoichi's stance was firm and rigid, her feet carefully spread and placed for a quick push off. She lunged towards Sakura, intending for a standard down sweep. Sakura didn't have much experience fighting against such a weapon, it was too large, bulky and slow to draw for most nin -'Which is exactly why a Mist nin is using one'- and she prayed it would be similar to countering a katana.

Sweeping to the side, another kunai was quickly hurled at Sakura's opponent as she hoped to pin her in the side. The Mist nin twisted her body in time to dodge, retreat and then lunge again, this time hoping to hit true with a sweep of her blade. All she cut was grass. With a chakra infused back hand spring Sakura propelled herself higher into the air so she could then seamlessly drop into the six foot high grass without leaving a track. The Mist nin swore, following in Sakura's direction by cutting large swathes in the grass.

The Mist nin heard a rustle from her left side and paused, realizing she had lost the upper hand. The barrage of Senbon that filtered through the grass from behind her prove home the point, painfully so as they drove into the flesh of her back, the chakra used to hurl them through the grass dissipating. The Mist nin returned a volley of kunai but they fell short after only a couple of metres, the grass acting as a buffer. It didn't stop the enemy kunoichi from lunging forward after them, piercing her blade through the swaying grasses to where she suspected Sakura to be. All she
was met with was an exploding tag. The subsequent explosion pushed the Mist nin back through the air, the flames licking at her face and scouring her skin. Her flight backwards was quickly stopped but a chakra enhanced foot to the back, resulting in a swift, sickening crack. Her body tumbled backwards over the foot, landing in a heap at the feet of the pink haired missing nin.

Sakura looked down at her now screeching opponent, the woman desperately trying to move away from her. The Mist nin's legs were useless now, Sakura had completely pulverized a section of her lower spine with that swift, overpowered kick. Sakura kicked away the Odachi that the enemy woman had dropped in her shock, which seemed to snap the Mist nin out of her shock. She reached for her kunai pouch, refusing to be done in so easily, regardless of her now crippled form. She was stopped by a heel to the shoulder that dislodged the joint from its socket. There was no scream that punctuated that one.

"Reach again and it's the other shoulder." Sakura loomed over her opponent, who seemed much older than she was.

"You know the routine. Who is with you, when should I expect them, why are you here and under what orders." Sakura was met with nothing but a petulant glare. Sakura was beginning to think the woman was a mute, there had been no battle banter which she found odd from a Mist nin. They always loud mouthed, overly aggressive and hard to kill. 'I suppose there are always exceptions to the rule.'

"Once again. Who is wi-" "Go fuck yourself." There it was. She had begun to think she was mute. Sakura raised an eyebrow, but held down her desire to simply walk away and leave the kunoichi here to die a slow, miserable death. However, Sakura needed a blank spot in her information filled and this woman would see fit to do so. She wandered over to the Odachi that had been kicked aside so easily and picked it up. Returning to the prone kunoichi, she used the tip to flip aside her Jounin vest on her left side, before pressing it delicately to the black shirt underneath. The tip resting between the gap of the fourth and fifth rib. The Mist nin knew this as well.

"My last five combatants have all been Mist nins. All I seem to run into these days are Mist nins. I am getting really sick and tired of being left drenched to the bone after having to kill you fucks. I want to know why you are all so insistent on seeing me dead." They were like ants, continually crawling out of the wood works after her, and she wanted to know why. Sakura's past with Kirigakure had been that of any average shinobi tied to an opposing village.

"And here you are, so far away from home, seemingly all by yourself, so determined to kill me." Sakura's Sandogasa didn't do much to hide her snide expression or her angry eyes. While she had always been pursued by either bounty hunters, hunter nins or the average shinobi, she had yet to encounter one village -save for Konoha- so persistent on her death. If she had any chance of persuading them to leave her the fuck alone, she needed to know why, and if the answer to that why was something she'd be unable to deal with. Well, the deaths these Shinobi faced would be getting a bit more gratuitous. Sakura was a swift, merciful killer when she needed to be, the idea of putting another living thing through unnecessary pain didn't sit well with her, but she rationalized, if an example needed to be made, it would be made.

She was still met with nothing but silence.

"You are dead." She sighed, a weary, tired look seizing her face. "The second I got the upper hand, you were dead. You're dead now. To your village, dead. To your family, dead. The only thing that doesn't know that yet is your heart." The metal tip of the Odachi tapped at her chest, at the heart Sakura knew lay just beyond the clothing and the flesh of this woman paralyzed before her.
"I can still have honour in death." The Mist nin bit back in a scathing tone, sweat dotting her hair line and cheeks.

"There is no honour in being a Shinobi." Sakura counted just as easily. She raised the sword, giving it a once over, the sun sparkling off the metal like fire. The blade was covered in no blood, no guts, simply the desiccated remains of the grass the Nin had swiped at. The Odachi was a weapon popular among Samurai. Samurai who held their honour above all else. It seemed this Mist nin had chosen the wrong line of work.

"You should have been a Samurai." Sakura spoke, mostly to herself, before dropping the tip back to its resting place on the prone womans body. "Now talk," Pink eyebrows rose as she stared down her nose. "and I can grant you some honor in death." Sakura knew that that kind of deal wouldn't work on the Mist nin, that they had been trained far too well to fear what would happened if they talked, if they divulged important information. So, Sakura was surprised when it did work.

"The Mizukage has struck a deal with the Hokage." Sakura reeled back mentally, her brain dashing through scenarios as to why this treaty had been sprung at such a time. "One of the stipulations is that you had to be dead."

'Trust Sasuke to pawn this job onto someone else. Like usual, I'm not worth his time.' Sakura thought bitterly.

"They'll keep coming. They will send more and more. By the time I left they were already training Hunter nins how to counteract your chakra infused fists." The woman laughed, obviously upset that she hadn't been in those classes. She may have survived, otherwise. "You have become the Mizukage's prime target. Order are out that if you are spotted by shinobi in the field that they are to disregard current missions and instead neutralize you." That would explain that chunin team on the coast of the Land of Lightning.

"Why?" Was all Sakura could think to ask. "What's so good about this deal?"

"Mizukage-sama knows that war is coming. He knows what the Hokage wants and he wants to spared that fate. He seeks partnership with Konohagakure so that he, and the village, will be on the winning side once the dust has settled." Sakura gave a nod, placing the palm of her hand on the end of the Odachi's handle. She pressed swiftly and firmly, silently sliding the kunoichi's blade into her own heart. While the act may have been silent, the woman's death was not. The violent panting as her heart tried to beat around the impalement was heard to hear, the woman's desperate clutching at the sword, hard to watch. It only last a few seconds, and then the Mist nin went still, her last exhalation slightly longer than normal.

That was what Sakura was waiting for.

Falling to her knees, she let go of the breath she was holding, jamming the butt of her palms into her eyes to rub furiously. Deep down, Sakura was still Sakura. She still had a tendency to care too much, she was still a little soft and she never could get over taking someone elses life. No matter how many times she was told she'd get used to it, or she'd stop caring about it in the end she never had. Every death weighed on her, even the death of this lone kunoichi who would never live the honourable life of the Samurai. Who would not even have the decency of a burial.

Sakura stood, pulling her hands away from her eyes to look down at her fallen foe. She had to move, Sakura didn't know if the kunoichi had teammates in the area and she didn't want to hang around to find out. She hesitated.

'I can spare a few seconds.' She thought, though she knew it was for her own comfort and not the
honour of the deceased. She grasped the Odachi and slid it from the corpse, before letting it drop by her feet. Bending down she arranged the enemy kunoichi's hands over her chest, making sure her feet were tucked together neatly.

Sakura left the dead woman behind her, her Odachi driven into the ground by her head, her Hitai-ate tied around the handle. 'I have to admit' She broke off into thought, sparing another second to look at the crystal clear sky 'this is a lovely place to die.'

It was three uneventful days later that Sakura found herself on the coastline between the Land of Earth and Takigakure heading towards Kaishoku Gake, a large town well known for its illegal underworld dealings. She was a few minutes from breaching the outer cusp of the city if the cry of seagulls gave her anything to go by. Cloudy jade eyes peered around at her settings, though there was nothing very remarkable to view if you weren't into harsh grasses and decaying windswept tree's growing out of the cracks in rocks. The wind was harsh here and carried the harsh scent of seawater.

As she breached the hill she had been slowly trekking up, a much better site greeted her. She had picked an excellent time to arrive. The golden hues thrown from the sun sitting on the horizon as it slowly seeped under it were cast across the sky in beautiful arcs. The set the clouds above Kaishoku Gake on fire with brilliant carmines, oranges and yellows, though the most overt were the billowing carnation pink hues. Sakura took a few moments to take in the sight, the stiff dusk breeze sweeping through her travelling cloak and under her sandogasa. Her shoulders dropped as she relaxed for the first time in a while, content in the knowledge that any shinobi following her wouldn't trek this far into such dangerous territory. If they did, she assumed they'd be dead before they made it to her. The illegal shinobi in Kaishoku Gake weren't too fond of ninja from the big bad hidden villages. Speaking of said town, Sakura decided she wanted to actually be there before the sunset, traversing the stone steps down the cliff face to the city was not a pleasant task when you couldn't see one foot in front of your face.

Following the well-worn foot path that most took down into the city, she continued on with her journey. 'I am going to have such a good sleep tonight.' Was the only thought going through her tired mind. It had been a couple of weeks since she slept in a bed. As she turned past the sign that marked the stairs and subsequent entry into Kaishoku Gake, she saw gazed down onto said city, just enough light left in the sky for her to be able to see the large expansive town in all its glory. It was certainly a sight to see.

The cliff side curved out before her, stretching hundreds of feet from the coast to the peak. Carved out within this very cliff, was a massive cave system, the largest of which resided directly in the middle, surrounded by smaller ones. Neons flashing signs and house side lights could be spotted from here, as could the very buildings and houses themselves. It looked just like any other bustling city or town, the only difference was it happened to have been built within the side of a bloody cliff. A thousand or so people resided within this illegal little outcrop, self-governed only by itself and its residence. A city of no rules, only the strongest and smartest could live here.

Or if you had something worth offering.

Sakura continued her trek down the stairs, into the city, but it was dark before she even made it halfway down. However once she was in the city, it was an entirely different world. The massive main cave -her destination for the rest of her stay here- was alive and humming with activity. Bright lights lit up the streets, music pouring from bars, the scent of food wafting from street side restaurants, even the hustle and bustle of a full main street help Sakura relax. Through her weeks and months on the run through foreign countries, through expansive forest and empty wastelands, Sakura always missed the presence of other people. She despised being alone in an empty world that held nothing for her anymore.
'It's been too long.' She gave a soft sigh as she disappeared among the massive, her henge already in place. Her plain brown hair and her plain brown eyes let her fit right in and be completely unnoticed. Kaishoku Gake was more like a gambling, resort town than an dark, back alley black market type thing, so Sakura found it far more easy to slip by. There were plenty of young females here already. Her train of thought dropped as her stomach grumbled loudly, the scent of BBQ tantalizing her nostrils as it drifted past on a coastal breeze.

'When was the last time I ate?' She hadn't packed enough food when she left from her last destination, an almost fatal mistake, especially if something had gone wrong in her journey here. Sakura was normally very good and making sure she had enough calories for the day to be able to keep up with her grueling regimen while maintaining enough body fat and energy. She certainly did not need to become some delicate waif or pass out from malnutrition. Sakura had to maintain her bulk to support her taijutsu and chakra consumption. She needed to make her way to her lodgings, and fast. Slipping through the crowds and away from the mouth-watering foods that begged her to join them, to soak in their aroma and vanquish them in her dry, starving mouth, and down some dingy back alleyway. The scent of which immediately helped curb her desire to eat anything.

It was a few more twists and turns until she found the place where she would stay for the night, the Ducks Dinner. Looking up at the sign that hung over the large wooden double doors, she was greeted with the same insignia she saw every time she visited. The paint was cracking and peeling, but the imagery remained, that of a fox holding a big fat brown hen, hanging limp in its mouth. What it had to do with the name of the establishment, Sakura had no idea. Another grumble reminded her she had to eat.

Pushing in through one of the double doors while she swiftly removed her sandogasa, Sakura was greeted by the average sight she had come to expect. That was the hustle and bustle of one overly packed tavern. Sakura fought her way through the throngs of pub goers, making her way to the bar where she managed to burst through the throngs of old crotchy men, drunken idiots and women of ill-repute.

'I mean I'm all for sexual freedom but have some common decency.' Sakura huffed as she watched one couple pretty damn close to doing their own rendition of the horizontal mambo right on the side of the bar. Even though the bar was crowded, Sakura knocked her knuckles on the smooth wood surface in quick succession. It only took one quick second before she was being towered over by one astute barman. She always got quick service here.

"Keiko-chan" The tall, long haired brunette purred her way. She simply rolled her eyes as the man before her dropped to an elbow on the counter, his head coming to rest right in front of her face. Fuji always made time for 'Keiko.' "It's been awhile since I saw you around. Tell me, you haven't been sleeping at other taverns, have you? After I go out of my way to get Chichi to give you a discount."

"Of course not, Fuji-kun." It had been awhile since she used that honorific, but anything she could do to make Fuji like her more was welcome. He helped her a lot and was a good contact to have. the Ducks Dinner was a tavern of notoriety in this scene, people posted jobs and traded information easily within these four walls. Having the son of the owner like her was a very, very good thing. "You know this is the only place I come to when I visit. The other places don't have barmen quite as cute." It took everything in her power to wink and smile at him without feeling like a complete moron. She was rewarded with a hearty laugh as he stood back up, grabbing a glass from under the counters ridge, his charming smile still affixed firmly in place.

"What will it be tonight" Fuji quipped with the pleasantries out of the way.
"No sake tonight, Fuji-kun." Sakura held her hand up in a stopping motion "I haven't eaten anything in the last couple of days, my supplies ran short. Just some water and miso will do me tonight, if the kitchens still open."

Fuji's eyebrows bunched with a slight show of concern, but nodded regardless "I'm sure they'll make an exception for you, Keiko-chan. If not, I'll whip it up myself." He shrugged his shoulders as he placed the glass of water in front of her before turning around and wondering off out back "I mean, how hard could it be?"

And that is where Sakura sat for the next few minutes, carefully nursing her drink so she wouldn't be sick once her miso arrived. 'Tomorrow I'll pig out on some calories and try to gain the fat I burned off back.'

A bowl of miso arrived in front of her ungracefully, sloshing up the sides of the bowl and nearly tipping out. The tofu at the bottom jigged restlessly but Sakura's gaze was elsewhere.

"Hamasaki-Ojisan!" Sakura startled, not expecting to be greeted by Fuji's own father, let alone have him bring her food to her. She gave a respectful nod of her head, which Hamasaki returned. He was just as tall as Fuji -if not twice the muscle mass- a great big bushy moustache that covered his lips and a great big bald head. Not a single follicle in sight.

"Eat quickly." Was all he spoke and Sakura was suddenly on edge. While she tended to stay out of the stern Hamasaki's way, she was not used to him talking to her so forcefully. Something was wrong. Taking heed to Hamasaki's words -or was it a warning- Sakura forwent the spoon and simply picked the bowl up and drank directly from it, the tofu pieces bumping her lips until they were swallowed at the end. Sakura dearly hoped she wouldn't vomit that all up later.

"You have visitors." Concise and straight to the point, the three words doing nothing for Sakura's already fried and exhausted brain. Hamasaki drew his arm up, jabbing two thick, burly fingers towards the corner of his establishment. Sakura really did not want to turn around.

"I don't know what you do or who you run around with, but I don't want this kind of thing going in my bar. I put up with a lot of shit and stay out of peoples private dealings, but this is too much. Fuji likes you Keiko, lord knows the boys sick in the head for it and I done a lot of things for you, for him, but I will not let him get mixed up in whatever it is you need to do with them." His eyes were hard and Sakura really, really did not want to turn around.

But she did and she regretted it immensely,

There, in the dark, stolen corner were two men she had never wished to see in her life again. The black, high collared cloaks gave them away in a heartbeat, the red clouds burning into Sakura's retinas. There kasa placed on the table in front of them she was able to identify them with ease. After the Gaara incident, who couldn't? Sitting on the other side of the tavern from her, was one Hoshigaki Kisame and one Iwa no Deidara.

'H how did I not notice them?' Sakura panicked internally, 'Is it because it's so crowded? So many Chakra signals fried by ability to sense, especially since they're covering theirs so aptly.' She rationalized. Sakura tried to keep some semblance of cool as she assessed the situation. 'How the fuck am I supposed to do that!?' Came her mental shriek when all three made eye contact. Hoshigaki's subdued grin nearly made her choke on her own water, but Deidara's response to his newfound attention was worse. Raising a hand to the side of his head, he gave a short two fingered wave, mouthing the word 'yo' mockingly from the mouth in his hand.
'That arm should not be attached.' Was Sakura's only thought, she knew that elbow was completely removed due to her late Sensei's Kamui, so why it was back was beyond her.

"They want to talk to you Keiko." Sakura turned back to Hamasaki, looking into his hard, cold eyes. "Now."
Tired Thoughts

Chapter Summary

Her light destroyed, Sakura now finds herself on a path she never thought she'd take, that of a missing-nin. Rumors of her status are spreading, and one organization has taken notice. Redemption is offered, will it be taken? Will the light of her life be replaced with a catastrophic boom? DeiSaku

Chapter Notes

A/N Welcome to chapter two! And wow, two chapters in two days, that's a first! I wouldn't hold your hopes for that happening in the future. I'd like to keep to a weekly release schedule, so let's see how that goes. We finally get to see Sakura meet some Akatsuki members!

My secret hope in publishing a DeiSaku fic is that it will make other authors want to write some as well. There are fuck all new ones being published which sucks for me.

Now enjoy your action packed chapter two!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Recap

There, in the dark, stolen corner were two men she had never wished to see in her life again. The black, high collared cloaks gave them away in a heartbeat, the red clouds burning into Sakura's retinas. There kasa placed on the table in front of them she was able to identify them with ease. After the Gaara incident, who couldn't? Sitting on the other side of the tavern from her, was one Hoshigaki Kisame and one Iwa no Deidara.

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Tired Thoughts

Chapter two

Sakura would have liked to run. She would have liked to run far, far away. Instead, she was very calmly pushing away from the bar and slowly walking over to the table where two very dangerous men were waiting for her.

'How did they find me?' Was the scared little whisper running through her head. This is a very, very bad situation to be in.' Sakura did not stop assessing her surroundings, regardless of how hard it was to do in a smoky tavern filled to the brim with people. She kept eye contact with the
two men, just as they steadily watched her walk towards them, navigating the crowd. *If only I could get out of here, I might be able to outrun them. Go through the back tunnels, hopefully pop up somewhere close to Iwagakure. I doubt blondie wants to get too close to home.*

Wait a minute.

*Smoky?*

*Filled with people?*

And as a rather large, burly man passed in front of her, breaking the eye contact between her the two missing-nin *'wait, shit, I guess I'm one too'*- she formed her hands into the seal of the ram, initiating her Shunshin no jutsu. The heavy smoke that hung in the bar was easy cover for the poof of smoke she left behind, giving her a valuable few seconds for her escape to go unnoticed. Sakura was gone and out through a small, high window to the left of her before anyone had even noticed.

At least, that is what she had hoped.

A few seconds after her departure an explosion ripped out the wall and window she had escaped from, molten rock fragments pouring into the very alley she had just jumped out of. Sakura needed to run faster. *Didn't take them long.* Sandogasa in hand, she propelled herself from rooftop to rooftop, making her way deeper into the cave and away from obvious freedom the sea would give her.

*Hopefully they think I chose the easiest path to escape from and went towards the sea. That will buy me some valuable time.* Sakura pushed herself forward, her body dipping even lower; she needed to get off the rooftops and to a more discrete location. Her plan would be shot if she got caught by either one of them. Hoshigaki could sap her chakra and her strength in a heartbeat and Sakura had no way to counter long range fighters like Deidara that wasn't throwing giant pieces of earth at them.

Jumping from a rooftop to a severely lower balcony, Sakura's knee's waivered and she was forced into a forward roll to recover. In retrospect, Sakura was glad for this turn of events as a giant, bandage covered sword slammed into the wall beside her, slicing through the air where her head had previously been. Eye wide and frantic she looked up to see Hoshigaki grinning down at her, face full of teeth. He was easily standing upon the balconies ornate railing and effectively blocking her in.

Forced to act -and act quickly- Sakura made her move by throwing her forward momentum to the side, bursting her way through the sliding door and into some poor saps apartment, away from the towering shark. On her feet and ignoring the pain radiating from the shoulder she had used to body check the door out of existence, she was quickly moving again. Sakura dived over the coffee table just in time to barely avoid another swing of Samehada. She swore as the sword sapped just a bit more chakra from her than she had been willing to give up. Sakura took just a second to turn from her leap over the coffee table, her toes catching under the rim of said table and flicking it up and into Kisame.

She was gone before she heard it connect with Samehada, ducking left into what appeared to be a kitchen. The chakra she had been building in her right hand was quickly and violently dissipated into the wall blocking her from her escape with a single punch, rendering the wall to crumbs and dust. Leaping through the hole she had made, she ducked left again and once more *through* an identical set of sliding doors. This time instead of being caged in by the ornate railing, she chose to simply fly over them.
'Thank god these shitty cheap apartments are all built the same.'

When she landed from her second story descent, her knees held strong. Pushing forward she darted down an alleyway in front of her. She had no idea where she was going and had nothing more to go on than a general direction. She just prayed she’d be able to outrun the ex-mist nin.

'What the hell is it with mist shinobi lately?!' Sakura's mind was slipping into shock if she honestly thought that she had time to be thinking about that at a time like this. A flurry of kunai forced her to dodge left, down another back street. He was going to try and herd her to where he wanted. 'Fat chance!' Sakura thought as she dived through a body sized hole in a dilapidated fence to her right. Sakura regretted her decision as that move brought her to one of the large, water reserve lakes. She had just been successfully herded.

'If I can make it across the lake without engaging Hoshigaki I can exit through one of the water tunnels.' She just had to make it across the lake first. Sakura cursed bitterly to herself as she was left with no time to contemplate her maneuvers. Sending a steady stream of chakra to the bottom of her feet she dashed out along the water's surface, successfully fulfilling a portion of Kisame's plan.

The distinct splash of a large object entering the water resonated from behind her and Sakura knew she had lost the only edge that had kept her from Kisame's grasp. While Sakura may have been faster on land, she was incomparable to Hoshigaki once he was in the water. Luckily, Sakura's ability to sense the chakra under the water would give her some edge, as she wouldn't have to stop and look around to avoid his attacks. She'd just have to be fast enough to avoid them.

The large flair of chakra and the new surge of multiple chakra signatures made Sakura's heart palpitate. She wished she could run faster.

'Just don't falter, don't falter. Think of a constant, steady stream. A river of chakra slowly ebbing across the bottom of your feet.' Her chakra was depleting steadily as it eased into the water below her to sense her opponent. It had been too long since she had had a rest, had a meal and had a good, decent sleep. These factors weighed upon her and her tired mind. Exhaustion was one of the biggest killers in shinobi and Sakura didn't want to join that percentage.

Sakura's eyes snapped to her left as a sharks fin slowly pierced the waters smooth surface, distracting her from the shark erupting out of the water from behind her. She managed to avoid by dodging to her right, skidding across the water before she proceeded to complete a successful sequence of back handsprings, taking her further away from the two sharks looking for a feed. She dashed in forward once more, not even breaking to look around for her opponent who had yet to make his appearance.

Speak of the devil and he shall appear.

This time as the shark's dorsal fin broke the surface tension, it brought along with it the ever smirking face of Kisame Hoshigaki crouched upon his summons back.

"We just want to talk, Haruno-san.” Sakura’s step faltered, her eyes wide as she shot him a startled look.

'They know it's me?' Sakura was bewildered, which was not a good thing to be in a middle of a fight. It left too many opening. 'How did they find me? I was so careful at covering my tracks. I used a new alias, I used a new henge, never staying anywhere for too long.' If she survived this, Sakura was adamant she'd learned where she fucked up to make sure it didn't happen again.

Caught in thought for too long, Hoshigaki found his opening. Leaping from the back of his
summons, he lunged forwards with a straight forward punch, intending to end this ordeal by
knocking the runaway leaf kunoichi unconscious. Sadly, it would not be over that quickly. Sakura
ducked low as Kisame went high; lunging forward with Kunai in hand she took the opportunity to
drive the blade into the Summons eye. Instead of the usual splash of blood, she was greeted with a
face full of smoke.

Next came the the near fatal swipe of a sword at her back, but Sakura hadn't stopped her forward
movement and was able to easily avoid it, though it did glance close enough to sap out a good
dose of her remaining chakra. She spun on a dime, her hand skimming across the water as she
kept low, eyeing her opponent. His stance was wide, one foot leading his body with Samehada
propped up on his shoulder, a hand loosely holding the grip. Samehada seemed to be loudly
protesting something, the scaled sword rumbling and shifting incessantly under its bandages.
Kisame's eyes narrowed on her and Sakura knew whatever happened next wouldn't be good for
her.

"When did you swap out for a clone? When I slipped into the water?" Kisame asked, his head
tilting to the side, it was the only time she was briefly out of his sight. Sakura gave a nod, her ruse
was up. 'Still, I didn't think it would last for long.'

"How'd you guess?"

"Samehada," He gave a jerk of his head, nodding to the perturbed sword "you didn't have nearly
enough chakra to be your real counterpart. You were infused with a good deal of chakra, at least
enough to take a couple of swing of Samehada without popping." As if 'popping' was the magic
word, the Sakura clone dissipated in a cloud of smoke, causing Kisame's eyes narrow further, his
upper lip curling slightly at one edge in annoyance.

"But Samehada knows the depth and magnitude of your chakra, and that was a pale imitation."

At the far shore of the underground lake, a brightly coloured nudibranch about the size of a terrier
fluttered up to the surface of the water.

"Sakura-sama, we have arrived." The summons spoke in a soft, feminine voice, its oral tentacles
waving around slightly. A hand slowly extended out of the slugs mouth, reaching to grab at the
rocky surface of the man-made lake's edge.

After being regurgitated Sakura found herself with a thin coat of slug slime covering her entire
body. Not a good look. Shaking her sandogasa she managed to dislodge most of the slime before
placing it back on her head, strapping the band across her chin to keep it in place.

"Thank you for your assistance, Chou-chan. I'm sorry for the pain I put you through." And with
that, Sakura released her sea-slug summons. Chou's suffering had been necessary for her escape,
but Sakura knew how much pain being in freshwater would have been for the saltwater mollusk.
Wasting no more time, Sakura took off down the tunnel laid out before her. Before long the tunnel
was pitch black and dead silent, the familiar rumble of Kaishoku Gake night life well behind her.
The slime she was covered in had slowly begun to dry over the twenty or so minutes Sakura had
been wandering for, covering her body in a dry, flaky film. While partially disgusted, Sakura
knew it would do well to cover her scent. She had no idea if Hoshigaki Kisame had any tracking
capabilities, nor if his sword did. She'd take whatever kind of coverage she could get.

It wasn't long before stray beams of moonlight began to pierce down into the dugout tunnel she
was traipsing through, finding their way down the man-made holes that had been created to funnel
rain water down into the water way and into the city. The new source of light helped calm
Sakura's nerves, the overwhelming darkness had been eating away at her nerves and making her
overly paranoid. Passing through the beam of moonlight she looked up, hoping to gauge how far away from the surface she was and how tantalizingly close to escape she'd be. With a soft sigh she realized she still had quite a way to go, the shaft was roughly fifteen feet in length from the surface.

'No way I could break through to the surface in one go. I'd cause the tunnel to collapse in on myself before I reached the top. Chance of survival is too low to even consider.'

"Nice to finally catch up to you, Haruno-san." Came the familiar, dark voice of her pursuer. He walked ever closer, until he was just on the edge of the moonlight. The light barely illuminated his face but it positively gleamed off his mouth full of fangs.

Sakura wasted no time in her defence, slamming her chakra enhanced foot into the ground to shatter the tunnel floor. Managing to dislodge some large chunks of earth and rock, she sent them flying towards her opponent with nothing more than a kick. The three flying clods of dirt and ore followed each other in quick succession towards the towering opponent. With a twist and a sideways swipe of Samehada, the first boulder slammed into the wall beside him, followed by a downwards slice for the second; rendering it into two harmless pieces that passed either side of Hoshigaki. The third piece followed too closely for Kisame to be able to bat away harmlessly and instead he had to take the hit defensively, blocking himself with Samehada as the sword took no damage from the attack. It did send Kisame sliding back a few feet, however.

Samehada unravelled slightly, seemingly excited at the prospect of a good fight.

Taking an aggressive lead, Kisame spurred himself forward, leading with Samehada as he swung, swiped and lunged after Sakura. Sakura avoided nimbly with a series of tumbles and back handsprings deeper into the tunnel, hopefully towards the surface. Kisame followed her maneuvers, ending Sakura's escape short with a punishing kick to her ribcage. Sent spiralling further down the tunnel then she originally planned for, Sakura managed to right herself just before unceremoniously landing under a larger, thicker beam of moonlight.

Her hand came to her gut and she gave a heavy wheeze. That had hurt. Hoshigaki was well known for his overwhelming physical prowess but it was a painful lesson to learn first-hand. Sakura was used to doling out the physical punishment, not receiving it. She had been lucky the kick landed lower than he had intended, she knew if she'd taken it to the ribs instead of the gut she'd be in a lot worse pain than she was now.

'That would have easily broken my ribs and maybe even collapsed a lung if it had connected.'

Kisame advanced and Sakura responded in kind. He swung Samehada in a horizontal swipe which Sakura ducked under; following through with a chakra infused punch upwards, looking to take Kisame's head clean off his shoulders. Hoshigaki tipped his chin upwards and he drew back in defence, avoiding the explosively violent chakra that dissipated where his head was only a few scant milliseconds beforehand. Sakura followed it up with some punishing taijutsu strike but Kisame avoided them with ease.

Normally Sakura would bank on an opponent trying to block her devastating punches so she could annihilate whatever limb they had chosen to sacrifice in doing such a stupid thing but she knew Kisame was a master in kenjutsu. Kenjutsu users tended to avoid with quick, clean footwork rather than block and Hoshigaki was living up to her expectations in that regard.

'Which is not good for me.' She bitched bitterly before stomping at the ground again in hopes that Kisame would jump backwards from the cracks developing below his feet and give her some space to regroup. Refusing to play by Sakura's rules he simply leaped in the air intending to bring Samehada down upon her head. This action pushed Sakura to take her own retreat, further down
into the tunnel. That was probably a bad idea, as it seemed to give Kisame enough time and space to be able to form his hands into one seal.

Snake.

"Suiton, Bakusui Shoha." And with the jutsu cast, Kisame seemed to erupt from the mouth with water before her very eyes. Having dealt with this technique before from other Mist shinobi's, Sakura slammed her heel into the ground, twice in quick succession. The first to dislodge a large section of the tunnels floor and the second to cause it to tilt up in front of her, guarding her from the oncoming torrent.

'That fuckers going to flood the tunnel.' Sakura all but hissed as she used herself to prop up the large hunk of compressed soil she used to shield herself. She grunted as the powerful torrent of water smashed into her shield before it washed over and around her, already soaking her up to her thighs. Sakura knew if she didn’t make her move now she’d be underwater in a matter of seconds. Looking to the roof above her, she spotted the shaft above her.

'Distance looks about five feet to the surface, it's risky on such low chakra and not knowing the geological makeup of the soil. If it's heavy in sand the whole shaft might collapse inwards, but if it's heavy in clay it may keep its shape long enough for an escape.' Sakura just had to hope that this tunnel was proof enough that the earth above her would hold true after an explosive unearthing. The water was just underneath her breasts at this point and she had to admit the fact that Kisame was unable to move during the casting of this jutsu was a lucky break.

Forcing the last, scant remains of her chakra into her hand in less than three seconds, she scaled her makeshift shield in that same time. Bracing herself, she closed her eyes and took one deep, last breath before she slammed her almighty fist into the roof above her. With a deafening roar her chakra dissipated into the earth, causing immense structural damage and creating hissing fissure. The superficial damage only lasted a scant second before the entire roof exploded outwards. Before the sediment, rocks and dirt had even finished their explosive new journey to places unknown, Sakura forced herself up and into the falling earth, her sandogasa helping keep the dust and dirt out of her face and eyes.

In a brief span of a few seconds, Sakura grasped onto the barren surface of the world above, narrowly avoiding being trapped under falling debris from her explosive exit. The rumble continued on as the large shaft she made begun to collapse inwards, dropping massive boulders and rocks into the water she had left below. Grasping a handful of one of the desert grasses, Sakura managed to pull herself up and out of the hole and onto her feet.

'Hopefully that blue fuck got caught in that, or at least blocked off by it.'

And while Sakura was busy thinking of Kisame, she had completely forgot about one, teeny tiny little thing. She was reminded about the itsy bitsy, inconsequential thing a second later when her body was suddenly seized by a massive, white, gyrating centipede that twisted around her body, forcing her arms to her side and her legs closed. With a wild gust of wind, the dust cloud that had spawned from her violent exit dissipated. Deidara -that teeny tiny, itsy bitsy little thing she'd forgotten about- was revealed not more than 10 feet in front of her.

It was a clear, cloudless night on an ocean side cliff, the sky filled above her by bright, luminous stars and an effervescent moon that cast a wide berth of light along the arid landscape.

'And all I have for company is a giant centipede,' Who was currently tapping at her face with its freakish antenna 'and a homicidally inclined bomber.' Who had yet to move from his spot ten feet in front of her.
"If you move I blow you sky high, yeah? This piece of art is explosive enough to render your little show obsolete by about" He paused, doing the maths quickly in his head "fifty or so metres." Finishing it off with a manic grin.

'So, he’d be in the blast range.' Sakura wondered if it would be worth it, but she doubted he’d be idiotic enough to detonate it when he'd be affected by it as well. 'Fifty metres seems excessive, though.' Sakura heavily doubted that Deidara thought any explosion excessive. A heavy boom resonated from behind her as another cloud of dust swelled and ebbed around her before she heard someone land on the hard ground not too far to the right of her.

'Guess he lived.'

"Nice to see you made it out safely, Haruno-san." Kisame quipped as the dust dissipated, casually dusting off dirt from his cloak.

Deidara waved his hand and the centipede took its command, knocking Sakura's sandogasa from her head, letting it tumble forward and land in front of her feet. The centipede went back to fawning over her face and head with its antennae, its job done.

"This does not look like Sakura Haruno." He pouted, looking dejected and casting a sour look at Kisame. "Sasori-danna ranted about her enough for her appearance to be permanently rammed into my brain, yeah? Some shit about vibrant pink hair and burning emerald eyes."

Kisame rolled his eyes, fuckin' artists.

"Who else would have the ability to do that?" He motioned with his head towards the gaping hole that had been ripped into the surface of the earth. Deidara gave a yielding nod, he had to give Kisame that much, it's not every day an ordinary kunoichi could mutilate the earth in such a vibrant, powerful display of destruction. He'd be lying to say he wasn't impressed, that his blood pressure hadn't peaked and sent his heart into overdrive at the mere sound of such carnage.

"Drop the henge, Haruno-san." Kisame asked in a stern, hard voice. Well, it didn't really come across as asking when phrased that way. Sakura contemplated if she could get away with faking she had no idea who they were talking about, try and talk-no-jutsu her way out of this mess she had stumbled into.

It seemed that decision was taken out of her hands when she took a second too long to formulate her answer. Stalking closer, Kisame simply held Samehada at Sakura's back, the sword beginning to hungry pull at what little chakra she had left to maintain her henge. After about three seconds there was a pop and a cloud of smoke and Kisame drew his blade away from her exhausted, depleted body.

Sakura could barely remain conscious as her head hung down, the few locks that hung in front of her face back to their startlingly pink colour. She could do nothing. No protest, no defiance and certainly no fighting. She was done. For all of the years she spent running, escaping, surviving it only took one night for it all be cast aside. Her will of fire devoured by a hungry sword.

'I'm tired. So tired.' She could barely think anymore, the only thing holding her up was the hard clay body of the tightly twisting centipede creation. 'Would it be so bad to sleep now? Would it be cowardly of me to simply give into death?'

She felt fingers grasp at her chin roughly, pulling her face up. Sakura could hardly meet the eyes of the blonde now peering down at her, scrutinizing her and her appearance. Her mind was already fading to black.
"I'd hardly call them burning emerald, more like cloudy jade, yeah."

'I could be with Naruto again.'

It was a slow, unpleasant return to consciousness. Her head throbbed, her body ached and her stomach was painfully empty. Sakura was also affected by a pretty severe case of chakra depletion. Her body had replenished enough for her to be able to maintain consciousness and the ability to walk, talk and think, but any kind of jutsu and chakra control was out of the question. As Sakura slowly, warily opened her eyes, she was greeted by the sight of her own lap.

'Legs are still attached' She wriggled her toes 'and functional.' That meant she hadn't be further damaged or mutilated while she was unconscious. Which would have been a surprise, if Sakura wasn't surprised over the fact that she was even alive.

"Surprised to see yourself alive, Haruno-san?" Her face must have given her away. "I told you we only wanted to talk." Kisame's voice came across slightly amused about the whole ordeal.

"You could have avoided all of this." 'This' obviously being the severe chakra depletion, bodily injuries and the fact that her torso and arms seemed to be restricted by three bands of explosive clay sculpted to look like a salamander biting its own tail. Great.

"Same rules as last time. Move and boom, yeah?" Why did everything he say seemed to end in a question? Why did he seem so keen to remind her that any kind of movement that could be taken as an attack would end up in her instant cremation with bonus scattering of ashes to the wind? Why did he seem happy about it?

'Because he's likely very, very insane.'

They both just watched her silently from across the fire that had been started within the middle of the area they had decided to call camp for the evening. It took Sakura only a brief second to realize they were nowhere near Kaishoku Gake. Seeing that there were actually tree's surrounding them and more than just a handful of mushrooms within view, Sakura would hazard a guess that they were straddling the line between the Land of Earth and the country of Kusagakure. Sakura had either been asleep for a long, long time or they had moved very quickly; it had taken her a week on foot to make it from this general area to Kaishoku Gake.

"If you'd like to know for medical reasons, you slept for about twenty four hours." Kisame was still giving her that stiff faced stare down, though as Sakura moved her gaze upon him, it seemed to break into an almost unnecessarily large grin. Off putting.

'They made it in quicker time than I had thought.' Moving over that amount of distance in that time frame was impressive. Her eyes flicked to Deidara. Though I suppose it's not all that impressive when you can fly over any obstacle.'

The conversation died away to nothing, as all three simply sat there under the stars. Sakura simply took this time to study her abductors, observation was the first point in her plan, she had to know what she was dealing with. Kisame was simply sitting there, staring her down, seemingly waiting for her to do something. He looked just like he had all those years ago when he and Itachi had made their last attempt to secure Naruto. He was just as tall, just as muscle bound and just as intimidating. He must have been close to his late thirties by now, at least thirty seven. His face was just as dull and blocky, his cheeks gaunt and unattractively sharp cheekbones.

Gazing at Deidara out of the corner of her eye, she found him far too tied up in his own work to be paying attention to her. He seemed to be crafting a small spider in his hands, his fingers softly
adding expressive detail to the tiny clay creature. Picking up a piece of clay he had prepared early, he attached the first leg to the body of the spider, pressing and forming it to adhere to the spider's cephalothorax. Sakura blinked as a tongue seemed to slowly slip out of his hand to begin licking at the juncture Deidara had just created, seemingly smoothing down and creating a better seal.

'T'd nearly forgotten about those.' There wasn't much information on those medical mysteries currently residing within Deidara's hands. They'd rarely been seen up close. Sakura could only speculate that people that had had the chance to generally didn't exist for very long afterwards. No one knew exactly how they worked.

'Kekkei Genkai? Kinjutsu?' Were Sakura's first guesses on the matter, but she doubted Deidara would be willing enough to divulge such secrets. As Deidara picked up the second leg he was to attach Sakura continued with her appraisal, just like he had graced her with one earlier.

His physical appearance had changed much, much more than Kisame's had. The last time Sakura had seen Deidara had been when he had used Gaara's body as a seat, the mere thought of the past event cause Sakura to clench her fists in anger, though the volatile emotion quickly subdued into one of regret and grief. Sakura quashed both.

'He must have been seventeen or so back then, only a few years older than me. He must be around twenty-five now.' His looks had matured noticeably, his once soft and round jaw line had become a bit more rigid, the slight puppy fat of his cheeks long gone after years of intense fighting and training and instead replaced with firm cheekbones, a trait she'd come to recognize from Iwa nin. His nose was sleek and thin and his lips were thin towards the outside, but full where it mattered. His face still retained that oddly feminine quality, but was easily off balanced by masculine ones. Quite androgynous.' Is how Sakura would have phrased his appearance in two words or less.

His hair was still a vibrant yellow blonde, though the topknot had been demoted into something much more subtle. Instead of sticking up and off to the side, the top section of his hair simply lay limp against the back of his head in a half ponytail, separated from the bottom section by his hitaiate.

His hormones must have kicked in as he had grown in height, once roughly the same height as her he was now easily taller than her, about five foot eleven if Sakura had to guess. Certainly nowhere near as tall as Kisame but it was nothing to scoff at.

"Finished with your one over, yeah?" Suddenly her eyes connected with the washed out denim of Deidara's as he lowered his hand to the ground, the tarantula he had been building slowly wandering off into the forest.

'It seems he was paying more attention to me than I thought' Instead of feeling abashed or blushing for being caught, Sakura simply remained deadpan, keeping his gaze.

"Are you ready for that talk now, Haruno-san?" Kisame broke the connection, drawing her attention back to him.

"It's not like I have the choice, Hoshigaki-san." Sakura spoke for the first time, very voice slightly rough. She extended to Kisame the same respect he had offered her in regards to using her name. 'I may be a missing nin but I still have my manners.'

"We were sent by our Leader to offer you an invitation to join Akatsuki." Sakura eyes were bewildered as she reared back, if she'd been expecting anything it certainly wasn't that. She let out a bark of laughter as her mind fully processed what Kisame had just told her.
'Akatsuki is offering me a position?' Sakura continued laughter at such a thought, the imagine of her running around with a bunch of merciless killers, ripping out Bijū from innocent Jinchuriki's, becoming the very thing that had endangered Naruto up until his final days. The very thing Naruto, herself, and all of Konoha stood against.

She may have been a coward, worse than trash, but Sakura was no Akatsuki.

Her laughter died to a series of giggles and misplaced hiccups as the restraining newts around her torso grew tight. As she looked back to Kisame, the one to pose the question, she was almost surprised to see him watching her with a serious stare. It was almost as if he was waiting for her to give him an answer. 'Oh. He is.'

"No." Was the simple answer she gave, having put no thought into any kind of notion of joining. At this point, Sakura would rather slit her own throat and bleed out on the lovely slug slime covered yukata she had bought a week prior than accept such an invitation.

At her answer, Deidara seemed to start making a fuss, clearly irritated that she hadn't accepted straight away. Kisame simply closed his eyes and sighed heavily, leaning further back from his upright position.

'Obviously that was not the answer they were hoping for.' Sakura suddenly became very, very wary. She hadn't taken into consideration what would happen after she declined their invitation. Just because she had survived long enough to hear the question, didn't mean she'd survive after giving the answer, if anything, her chances rapidly dropped. They now had no need for her and a witness to dispose of.

"Leader gave us direct orders to bring you back by any means necessary if you were to refuse." This may have been worse than the death they could have given her. "He would like to answer any questions you have that may have led to you turning down the invitation."

"There is no answer to any question I could ask him that would make me, even for a second, consider joining you." She bit back scathingly, voice full of venom and fire. Deidara perked, his eyes looking at her in an interested light, seeing the emeralds full of fire that Sasori-danna had spoken about so snorted in amusement at the quick change Sakura had portrayed before his eyelids dropped and a lazy sneer caught his lips.

"If you think you have any choice in the matter, you'd be wrong. The invitation is a formality on his part, yeah." He raised his eyebrows "The only way you're getting out of this is death."

"I would rather." She spat back at him, her lips curling back in a snarl as her arms strained against the salamanders. Deidara's eyes narrowed as he brought up his hand, already forming one side of the Tiger seal.

"Do not." The two words from Kisame stopped Deidara in his tracks as he dropped his hand, looking off to the side like a spoilt brat, a pout on his lips.

"If she's to die" Kisame's beady black eyes bored into her own "it will be by Leaders hands."

Chapter End Notes
The jutsu Kisame used, Suiton: Bakusui Shoha is known as Water Style: Exploding Water Shock Wave in English.

If you're wondering how Sakura managed to avoid Kisame's shark summonings when she escaped with the aid of Chou, she cast a simple genjutsu over them that would make them perceive Chou as a simple a plastic bag littering the water.

Next Chapter:

Some more banter, and a journey to Amegakure!
Nighttime Thoughts

Chapter Summary

Her light destroyed, Sakura now finds herself on a path she never thought she'd take, that of a missing-nin. Rumors of her status are spreading, and one organization has taken notice. Redemption is offered, will it be taken? Will the light of her life be replaced with a catastrophic boom?

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hey guys, welcome to the next chapter! I just want to take a second to give a shout out to another really good deisaku fic called 'Expedient' by the author, Swiftkick. If you like Deisaku I'd really recommend it, it's a great read and has several chapters up (14 at this time.)

On another note, I am publishing this story on a Tumblr account as well! Bulldango is the URL username- You can follow to get up to date notifications on how the story is going, have a chat to me and I can answer questions you might have about the story! If you have trouble finding the tumblr, mail me!

This chapter is a bit shorter than I'd like, but I thought it was a good place to end the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Recap

"If you think you have any choice in the matter, you'd be wrong. The invitation is a formality on his part, yeah." He raised his eyebrows "The only way you're getting out of this is death."

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Nighttime thoughts

Chapter three
The air was tense after the short, thunderous spat between her and Deidara. Sakura was still indignant that they had entertained the thought that she would join them, it was a disrespectful slap in the face.

'\textit{Then again, I\textquoteleft m sure no one would have thought that I\textquoteleft d defect from Konoha.}' She knew if someone had travelled back in time to tell her she'd be a missing-nin on the run three years ago, she'd be just as furious as she was now. But, the past was something Sakura didn't want to confront right now -or ever- so she took a few, steady deep breaths and rammed those thoughts and feelings deep down inside of her. She had much more important things to worry about, like escaping these two very dangerous men and not dying.

If they made it to their destination before she could do the former, she was sure the later would come to fruition.

Still, the thought of death hanging over her head did little to quench her morbid sense of curiosity about these two. There had been plenty of rumours about them, short little snippets of outdated information scoured over in the bingo books but really nothing to tangibly go on. Any new and up to date information she could get on these two were sure to sell very well on the black market and secure her a considerable bag of cash for her troubles.

'I still have to figure out how they managed to find me.' The fact that they had managed to find her meant others could as well, it was a glaringly large hole in her defence that had to be mended. Looking up at her captors, she decided now was a good a time as ever.

"How did you find me?" Straight to the point, Sakura wasn't used to pussy footing around. The concise question seemed to stir a bit of amusement in Kisame, obviously not used to handling captives that weren't sniveling puddles of piss and would actually try to engage in conversation.

"We," Kisame flicked his eyes to Deidara and back again. "didn't have the pleasure of tracking you down. Zetsu had that that task. Apparently you were very difficult to find."

"He wouldn't stop bitching about having nothing to go on, yeah." Sakura was pleased she had been such a pain in the arse to locate. Kisame gave a soft snort of amusement, obviously remembering such an incident.

"He eventually got a lead; apparently an unaffiliated kunoichi was spotted using medical ninjustu in Kaishoku Gake a month ago." Kisame's grin was back, just as wide and intimidating as before, if not a bit condescending. "Not a smart move, Haruno-san. Medical ninjutsu is rare outside of the hidden villages, an unaffiliated shinobi using it would have been sure to bring some interest."

'Shit.' Was the first thought that went through Sakura's mind. She knew exactly what had screwed her over and once again, it was her own stupid sympathy. \textit{The boy with pneumonia.} 'He had been a street urchin Sakura had encountered in a back alley around the Ducks Dinner. The pain and suffering he had obviously been under had been too much for her to bare when she had the means to be able to help him. She had ended up bringing him to her room at the Ducks Dinner to treat him. it had been a simple if not long procedure and a few days' rest.

'I thought no one would have seen.' And no one had, except the boy had been conscious the entire time. It had been naïve of Sakura to assume the boy wouldn't tell anyone of the miraculous encounter with a pretty, young woman who had saved his life with glowing green hands.

"Deidara and I arrived and did some recon-" "That stupid brunette at the bar couldn't fucking shut up about you, yeah? You'd think in his line of business he'd know that is a risky thing to do." Deidara interrupted rolling his eyes to Sakura as his head tilted an unimpressed look on his face. Kisame had a near identical expression plastered on his, but it was firmly directed towards his
'God, Fuji, you fool.' Sakura's couldn't help but feel the subtle twang of regret pinch her heart. While she had enjoyed the man's time and affection, it had obviously been the wrong move to get so involved with him. Her throat felt hot and tight as shame crept into her feelings. She had just felt so alone, so unwanted.

'It felt nice to have a friend again. I'm such a fool.'

"From then on it was a waiting game." Kisame finished, throwing another small broken branch onto the fire. Sakura gave a solemn nod, recognizing she had gotten herself into this mess through her own stupidity. Still, it was an enlightening situation. Sakura gained some useful information in that they had been seeking her for a long time and that one of their members, named Zetsu, was the assigned tracker.

'If I can find him in a bingo book and collaborate some other information on him, that kind of info will sell well.' She conspired to herself. 'Information on the Akatsuki sells well. They've laid low ever since Narut-' She stopped herself short, a stiff inhale helped calm her nerves. He was not a subject she liked to bring up so lightly. Gazing back across the fire, she took the two men in again. Another question sprung to mind.

"Where are your partners?" This question seemed to pull both of the mens attention to her this time around, though they both seemed to watch each other out of the corner of their eye, trying to gauge whether or not this question should be answered. Sakura cursed herself mentally, guessing she had pushed the conversation too fast and worrying that they'd now clam up and not give her any new information let alone an opportunity to escape. Though, that last opportunity seemed to become less and less of an option as time wore on. The clay based salamanders still restricting her movements seemed to harden the longer they were exposed to the air which would make them noticeably harder to break. Harder to break meant she'd have to use more chakra to complete the task, and Sakura just didn't have the time to replenish that much.

"Not here." Was the answer Kisame gave, having weighed the pros and cons of continuing this conversation. Kisame wasn't a fool, he knew fishing for information when he saw it, but he also knew that the longer they kept her talking the less volatile she'd become. It also gave her less time to try and formulate an escape.

"Trust me," Deidara tacked on to the end of Kisame's answer. Sakura could choke herself on the amount of irony those first two words inspired. "If Sasori-danna could be here, he would, yeah?"

Sakura's psyche festered at that name. The name and the image it inspired would be burned into her mind's eye for as long as she lived. She could remember their first encounter as if it was yesterday, the vibranity of the scene and the strength of the emotions she had felt during their battle were still fiery and hot. It had been Sakura's first battle since her tuteliege under Tsunade. She had been Keen to prove her worth to her teammates, to Naruto, Kakashi-sensei, Chiyo-baasama and even, if she couldn hard admit it to herself, Sasuke.

She Chiyo-baasama had revealed his Hiruko puppet and told her of Sasori's crimes, she had been revolted and fearful. Her fear had permeated their entire battle, regardless of all her training, Sasori had still dominated her mental anguish.

'I overrode that. I overrode that fear with anger, violent destruction and my desire to prove myself, to protect Naruto and Sasuke.' Sakura reassured herself, accepting that fear was a natural reaction and remembering how she had overcome it. How she had put her faith in Chiyo-baasama and they had overpowered him and drove him back. Drove him down into the ground till he was on his last legs, his puppets destroyed.
His split second escape from his parents' last embrace had plagued Sakura for years.

"That's why." Kisame broke her out of her own little interlude into the past. Sakura flicked her gaze to see him pointing at her, a half smirk on his face. "That look on your face is why he sent us."

Deidara seemed to be looking at her intently as well, though his face was far from amused. His eyes were heavy lidded, but not narrowed, his lips relaxed instead of pursed and his head tilted ever so slightly towards her. It was a look Sakura didn't know how to describe, it sat heavy on her shoulders with how relaxed he was but how deep his eyes gazed into her. It made her uncomfortable.

She decided that looking at Kisame was preferable at this time.

He probably hadn't heard that one before.

"Leader-sama thought our partners' presence may make you...volatile." He responded to her look with the information she had no doubt wanted. Though his answer was right, Sakura was sure if she'd seen either of their partners she would have killed herself trying to kill them.

'Itachi has a lot of answer for.' She seethed to herself, anger boiling in her gut.

"There was no way he'd send Kakuzu and Hidan, no self-restraint, yeah? They'd've killed you." Deidara paused, thinking. "Well, Hidan definitely would've." He finished with a cheeky grin, his lone visible eye closing with the action. It came off playful but Sakura felt like it was anything but.

"So, where are we headed to?" It was a casual question that had deep implications.

Deidara opened his mouth and- "That's enough questions for today, Haruno-san." Kisame interjected and Sakura deflated.

'So close...' Was all she could whisper to herself.

"While you may have just woken up, We've been awake all day, Haruno-san." His attention turned to Deidara, a simple look conveying a simple command- No more answers. Deidara nodded as he stood and begun to kick dirt over the fire. It would be a cold night with no heat source, but Sakura was used to the chill of the night by now. She was lucky it was still summer and the nights were bearable.

As the light source was snuffed, she was left with nothing but the stars and the moon to guide her in the dark. It would have been soothing if it wasn't for the salamanders forcibly restricting her in the most uncomfortable of ways.

'Seems Deidara's taking first watch.' She quipped as she watched the older male jump up to a low branch, still within sight on the moonlit night. Kisame seemed to have already fallen asleep within the first few minutes of complete stillness, if the slow movement of his chest was anything to go by.

Sakura hadn't had a rest like that in years.

'How can he rest so easily? At this very point in time he is being hunted by every village on this continent.' Sakura could only watch in disbelief, slightly jealous of his silent, deep sleep.

'Though, in saying that.' She paused, looking up into the tree that Deidara was poised in. 'It's been a very, very long time since I last had a partner.' Regardless of the fact that they weren't each
other regular partner, there was obviously a sense of trust and respect between the two. Camaraderie was something Sakura's heart ached for. All of her previous ties had been severed after her defection from Konoha, there was no brotherhood that Sakura was a part of and it was something she missed deeply.

'And now it's being offered to m-' Sakura furiously ripped that thought apart before it came to fruition, she would not dignify such a proposal with her time. That fact it had been offered in the first place offended everything Sakura stood for. She was distractedly pulled from her downward spiral into just how much she hated this organization but a distinct gurgle, followed by an unpleasant stomach ache. Just like that, Sakura remembered she hadn't eaten in four days.

Sakura glanced towards Deidara, finding his holding his fringe to the side, exposing the scope to the quiet night. She distinctly cleared her throat, trying not to rouse Kisame from his slumber. Deidara turned to her, eyebrow over his exposed eye raised. He looked just as unimpressed as he had the entire time she'd spent with him.

"I haven't eaten in four days. I won't have the energy or strength to be able to travel if I don't eat." She spoke softly, knowing he'd be able to hear her from his roost. His lone eye narrowed on her as his scope gave a soft click and whirr, as if zooming in on her face. He paused, as if weighing what she said against what he knew. One hand if she was starved she would be less likely to fight or attempt to escape, but-

"Do you need to asked Hoshigaki-san for permission?" That did it.

He dropped to from the tree branch soundlessly before he stalked towards her. 'This one has an independent streak.' Sakura mused to herself as he came to a stop beside her, his frame towering over her until it blocked out what little light the moon graced the earth with. Sakura would be lying to say she wasn't mildly intimidated; for all her false bravado, this had been the man to take out the Kazekage.

As he dropped to his knees beside her, she let her shoulders drop in a sign of relief.

Deidara let out an amused huff, raising his eyebrows at her.

"Regardless of what happened before, I'm not permitted to actually hurt you, yeah? Leader-sama had strict orders. We only retaliate if you start it. Some bullshit about being cordial to a future member." He rolled his eye as he fished around in a weapons pouch secured to his thigh. "Not that I got that kind of treatment." He murmured under his breath. Sakura filed that away for later.

"Here." He offered a somewhat dry looking bread roll up to her, as if expecting her to take it.

"My arms are restricted."

"You've still got a mouth, yeah?"

'Is he honestly expecting me to eat this in one mouthful?' She silently hissed to herself, though only a slight narrowing of her eyes gave away such a thought. Deidara picked up on the soft movement even in the soft black of the night.

"I know you've got enough brute strength to be able to knock me out in one punch, yeah? The restraints are not coming off." He spat back at her before jamming the roll at her mouth. Sakura bite down on the stale roll, knowing she was lucky to just get this. Deidara, pleased that he'd fulfilled his position, turned and began to walk to his perch.

Sakura mentally checked off that route of escape.
Taking a swift bite, she could only watch in dismay as the roll fell from her mouth and fell into her lap, rolling down her thighs in a few swift tumbles to fall onto the grass. Deidara stopped in his track, his shoulders slumping. Sakura watched him, simply expecting him to jump back into the tree to let her crawl around in the fallen leaves trying to eat her roll off the forests floor.

She was pleasantly pleased to see him turn around and skulk back over to her, obviously not pleased. As he stood over her, he looked down at the bun before giving another tired sigh. He dropped to a crouch, swiping up the bun and poking it back at her lips.

"Could you please-" Sakura begun to ask before he tugged the bun back and brushed off a fallen leaf that had decided to stick around. He offered it back to her, his eyebrow raised as if to say 'Here, are you happy now?'

Sakura opened her mouth and let Deidara place a corner of the bun into her mouth where she gently bit down on it to secure it, expecting him to let go after she did. A few seconds ticked by and as he still held it, Sakura felt her heart palpitated. Giving a soft blink, she bit down further, severing a small bite of bread from the bun. He pulled it away slightly as she chewed, shooting a glance over his shoulder as his eye narrowed.

"I'm supposed to be keeping watch, not feeding you, Kunoichi." He hissed under his breath softly, finally addressing her, even if it was just by her job title. Not wanting to push her luck, Sakura didn't comment, simply opening her mouth again and allowing him to push the bun back into her mouth.

The repetition of open, place, bite, chew repeated several more times and Sakura took small bite after small bite. While pleased to finally have food after a ravenous four days, she certainly didn't want to be sick. It would take a day or two, but she should hopefully be at full strength again before they reached their destination where she could make a last stand if she needed to. She absentmindedly chewed her last scrap of bread as she thought of several different plans, theorizing which would be best to execute when.

She gave a slight jolt as she felt cold wood press against her bottom lip. Focusing on the object in the back was harder than it had been previously as the moving moon became obstructed by trees, but if she hazard a guess, she'd assume it was a water bottle. She silently appreciated the fact that he had offered without her asking.

As he tilted it upwards Sakura followed it by tilting her head back, allowing the water to slowly pool in her mouth before she swallowed. It was at this point that Sakura realized just how thirsty she was as she begun to greedily pull at the siphon in her mouth, sucking down as much water as she possibly could. It was quickly yanked away from her, a splash of water bursting on her chin from the abrupt removal.

"Woah, woah slow down, yeah." Deidara chastised her. "You'll be sick."

"Sorry." It was an unneeded apology, and certainly one that was not needed in the current situation. That situation being that this man had kidnapped her and threatened to blow her up. Twice.

Deidara simply watched her for a few scant seconds before standing.

"Get some sleep." It was a simple order, but Sakura didn't think it would be one she'd be able to follow. As he returned to his perch, Sakura settled in for a long, dark and mildly cold night.
She was awoken the next morning but a pair of feet walking just a bit too close to her for comfort. Her eyes snapped open to view Kisame not more than a few feet away and approaching her quickly.

'Seems like it's time to go.' Sakura thought to herself sleepily, only having slept a couple of hours the night before. She rolled to her knees as Kisame's hand came to rest on her left shoulder. As she tried to get her feet under her body with no use of her arms, she simply found herself dragged to her feet instead. Kisame obviously having no patience to deal with watching her flounder around had simply grasped a handful of yukata at her shoulder and pulled upwards. While the treatment was a bit rough, Sakura was still slightly pleased he had offered any kind of helping hand at all. Her knees were still aching and she didn't know if her legs would have been able to push herself up against gravity.

'When I have more chakra I'll have to do a deep muscle cleanse to try and heal any minor muscle tears and ease any strains.' Being a medical ninjutsu user had its perks, like being able to give yourself a deep muscle massage with a simple swipe of the hand.

Suddenly, Sakura found herself cast in a shadow.

Peeking up, Sakura saw a welcome sight; her Sandogasa once again covering her coral locks. Kisame then placed her traveling cloak around her shoulders, intent on hiding Sakura's artistic restraints from prying eyes if they were to come across any. The poncho like cloth was tied securely at the nape of her neck to hold it on.

"Deidara's ahead of us making preparations for travel." Kisame spoke lowly, intending for only Sakura to hear what he said, pressing on the back of her shoulder to guide her through the thick fern underbrush and between the spiralling trees.

'He's much more different than I had expected.' Sakura wasn't expecting anyone to be as polite as Kisame had been so far. He was well spoken, though not soft; he'd even offered her civility through this entire ordeal. 'I simply assumed Akatsuki would have been filled with brutes.' Though, Sakura could see how such prejudice had failed her now.

'It's not like these men are low class bandits, they're S-rank shinobi's.' She cut a look at Kisame from out of the corner of her eyes as she kicked through the undergrowth of the very overgrown forest they were currently in. 'Most high ranking shinobi's are from high ranking clans. They've probably got tradition and civility beat into them.'

Although a part of her doubted a lot of the blood thirsty clan gave a shit about civility. Sakura knew too well the horrific secret's some of them tried to hide.

"We're here, Haruno-san." Kisame broke her out of her self indulgent thoughts about clan life and secrets with a stiff pat on the back. Still quite groggy from the early wake up, she couldn't quite muffle the soft inhalation that she produced after the large, towering creations in front of her caught her eyes. Sakura had never witnessed a technique even similar to this.

Before her stood two giant bird like creatures, one quite different from the other. The first one was lithe and long, with the appearance of a crane.

'No, the beak is far too short.' Its long legs held it high off the ground with its two sets of wings folded down by its side. The frills around its neck alternated before breaking into two ridges trailing down its chest. Its tail was wide and frilled as well, offsetting it's rather short and stout beak.

The second bird was thicker and lower to the ground, but reminded Sakura very strongly of a
pelican. Of course, artistic liberty was taken in numerous places. Its neck was considerably shorter and its bottom beak was far wider and rounder. Sakura quite liked the frill atop its head. But before she could continue her perusal, the beast tilted its head down, its gigantic jaw dropping open to reveal the dark emptiness that awaited inside.

Sakura had little time to react as it lunged forward and swallowed her whole. Letting out a shriek of both freight and indignation, she tumbled deeper into the birds belly before she came to an unsightly rest.

Well, there's another escape route marked off the list. It seemed like this would be her lodgings for the rest of the travel and it left little room to move, let alone formulate an escape. The beak was sealed tight and while the walls were mildly pliable, she knew there was no way she'd be able to break through them with so little chakra and only her feet to use. There was also the problem of dropping like a stone as soon as she broke free, as she knew within the minute they'd be off the ground and hundreds of feet away from sweet, sweet mother earth.

"Speak of the Devil." Sakura quipped mostly to herself, her tone betraying the sense of defeat she felt as she felt the bird duck and lurch before leaping into the sky. As her cloudy eyes gazed out through the little peep holes the bird called eyes, she could see naught but cloud for miles.

It was then Sakura felt all hope leave her and resigned herself to death.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:

Sakura arrives at the Akatsuki stronghold where she is to finally meet the man that extended an unwanted invitation. What will this man say to her? Will he sway Sakura's resolute decision?
Recap

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Rainy Thoughts

Chapter Four

The soft of pitter patter of rain upon the clay bird's back broke Sakura from a dreary lull. It had been only a few hours since their departure from last night's camp and Sakura guessed they were moving through the country of Amegakure. With a startled gasp she felt the bird begin to fall, the pressure dropping within her area of confinement suddenly while she felt herself slide towards the tail end of the bird.

After what seemed like a few minutes of descent the bird seemed to land with a shuddering jolt that tipped Sakura towards the head, although this time her forward movement was not stopped by any thick clay wall and instead she was unceremoniously dumped on the wet, sodden ground. Righting herself and managing to get to her knees, she glanced around carefully, eyeing her surroundings. All she saw was tall, swaying reeds and other marginal plants; the ground too soft to support any great movement.

'I wouldn't be able to run very far without Deidara catching up to me via flight.' She thought to herself, never quite giving up the desire to escape. Such was her will of fire, Sakura would never give up in a fight, even on her deathbed.

'And what a bleak deathbed it is.' Her mental tone morose as she turned her head skyward, the Sandogasa that had been protecting her face from the rain nearly falling off her head.

The rain was invigorating.

The bird behind her despawned with an overly cloudy poof of smoke, falling back into the lithe hands of its creator to be consumed within his palms once more. Sakura was surprised he hadn't
detonated them, as seemed to be his calling card. Sakura simply chalked it down to him having enough brains not to bring attention to their little two man group. Before she could even ask where Kisame was, his hand grasped at the fabric covering her shoulder, bringing Sakura off her mud covered knees and to her feet.

"You couldn't have landed a bit softer, Deidara-san?" Kisame shot towards his partner, obviously not impressed with the overly rough treatment he'd used to get Sakura from within her bird.

"If she can't deal with a little bump and tumble, she wouldn't be much use to Leader-sama, would she Kisame-san, yeah?" He quipped back over his shoulder with a sly grin before slapping his kasa onto his head, stomping his way through the marsh and to their destination which lay behind her.

"I would like her to look presentable." Kisame bit back, mild annoyance in his tone as he looked over the slightly muddy Sakura.

"If Leader-sama asks, the blame will be put on you." Was his final comment on the subject as he used his hand on Sakura's shoulder to guide her around in place. What Sakura saw next did nothing to squelch the sense of rising despair in her gut.

There before her stretched a magnificent lake, the glass like surface muddled by the rain pouring down upon it, a small, tiny path way leading from the edge and stretching towards the city that laid beyond. The city itself filled Sakura with a blinding sense of awe as she looked upon it, a few breaks within the clouds, shining beams of sunlight down onto the towering spires. The light seemed to ignite along their great metal surfaces, creating effervescent halos around their edges and shining brilliantly out to her.

Sakura knew this to be Amegakure, the village hidden in the rain.

The village was dense with these industrial spires, dominating the landscape in its entirety. The water irises and canna lilies paled when placed against such a devastatingly impressive back drop, their bright blooms seeming misplaced.

"Come, Haruno-san. Leader-sama will be expecting us now." And if by mentioning his very name had holy power over the land here, the rain seemed to dry up and the clouds begun to break. Such a sign was too ominous for Sakura to be able to brush off, but the firm hand on her shoulder pushed her towards the waiting Deidara who stood at the beginning of the path. As if glumly accepting her fate, she strode forward towards what she had assumed would be her untimely demise.

'This has been a long time coming, Sakura.' She thought to herself, her head dipped to watch the path below her feet as the three of them began their short trek towards the hidden village, along the stretching path across the lakes surface. 'You've spent the last three years living on borrowed time, and it seems someone's finally come to collect.'

'But still.' She thought, casting a look into the lakes crystalline depths. 'Who thought that it would be Naruto's old enemy.'

Before she could react, Sakura was face to face with an overly large toad as it leapt from the water with loud croak. With a shriek and a cry Sakura reeled back, but she stepped too far and too fast and found herself self slipping off the side of the dock and into the frigid, rain cooled water of the lake. Kisame reached for her, but only grasped the tail end of her cloak, her fall unhindered as the clock was ripped from her.

'Cold!' Was the only thought that Sakura's shocked mind could process as the chill set into her
bones and water surrounded her from any and every direction. Her wits unravelled, Sakura strained to make it to the surface, the air from her lungs escaping as she thrashed within the water. Fear crept along Sakura's spine as the salamanders around her torso held tight, restricting her from using her arms and leaving her with only her legs to try and save herself with.

She needn't have feared, for as soon as it had started it had been destined to end after a few scant second. Sakura gasped a breath of damp air as she found herself ripped from the icy clutch of the lake by a now equally soaked Kisame.

"You'd think," She was face to face with the ex-mist nin now, and as his beady black eyes bore into her own she was reminded that although he had been polite and civil with her, he was most certainly a very, very dangerous man. "that a kunoichi would be more aware of her surroundings."

Cloak draped back over her shoulders, she was pushed forward once more, the pace towards Amegakure a little more hurried than it had been. The soft snickering from the blonde in front of her made her face flush red with heat.

As they reached the outskirts of the village, Sakura had dissolved into a mess of shivering flesh. Her clothing was still soaked and the chill had seeped deep into her bones. She looked like a drowned rat and certainly felt like one too. She seemingly had little interest in her surroundings, the streets were quiet, the doors closed and nary a bird nor mouse in sight.

It seemed almost unnatural for a hidden village to be this quiet.

'Another hour. I should be good for another hour.' Sakura thought, mentally checking her body's core temperature, the last thing she needed to happen was to become hypothermic. "Warm change of clothing, some tea or warm water and try to keep active." Sakura had to ward off the sudden onset feeling of fatigue, knowing that if she slowed down now it would simply speed up the symptoms until she was into full blown paradoxical undressing.

Her eyes drooped and her step faltered, her body leaning too far forward for her feet to be able to sustain her.

Before she could fall on her face, she found herself stopped with a jolt. Looking up, she found Deidara looking down at her, one hand outstretched and placed on her left shoulder, supporting her. She assumed the hand grabbing at her right shoulder was Kisame behind her, holding her from slipping further forward.

Sakura nearly let out a sigh of relief, although not for the reasons one would think.

'Now.' Was the silent command that slipped from her minds mouth and in a brief second, everything changed. Her arms tensed, surging outwards as the restraints cracked and crumbled to her feet in a natural show of raw strength. In the same movement her arm lashed forward, sending a fist colliding into Deidara's jaw, knocking him back several feet and onto his back, no doubt unconscious.

'Well, he wasn't lying about that part.'

The soft sound Samehada made while slicing through the air was enough of a tell for Sakura to be able to gauge at which direction it was coming from. Sidestepping, she missed the downward stroke Kisame had sent her way, planning on taking out one of her arms and no doubt draining her chakra until she reached unconsciousness, which wouldn't take more than a few seconds at her current levels. Twisting to face him side on, she stepped forward, taking the man off guard as she lunged forward.
Pushing a fraction of the chakra she could manage in such a short space of time, she rushed it to her fist before said fist slammed into Kisame's chin in a swift uppercut, knocking the man down and out, Samehada falling to the ground beside him.

At any other time, Sakura would have paused and gawked, preened over the fact that she had just knocked two Akatsuki unconscious in a span of a few seconds, but Sakura was still running on instinct and instinct told her they wouldn't be down for long and she needed to get moving.

Taking off at a dead sprint, she found herself moving back a couple of streets to the open drain she had spotted when they walked by earlier. It was easily enough room for Sakura to fit through, but certainly not someone as large and as bulky as Kisame. If he was going to be the one to follow her on foot, he'd have to find another way down. Wasting no time, Sakura slid herself down into the murky depths of the Amegakure drain system.

As she continued running, she felt herself warm up considerably. Although she knew it wouldn't be enough to warn off hypothermia forever, it would give her much more time to work around trying to find dry clothing.

It was a few more desperate minutes of running through the dark, damp pipes before Sakura felt like slowing down. She was grateful that the pipes had been clean from debris and tall enough for her to comfortably run through without having to duck. Sakura had been carefully keeping track of her progression through the pipes in her mental landscape, trying to make sure she wasn't running in circles.

The flashes of light peeked down into the depths from the many storm drain openings, helping guide her way through the empty pipes. It had been a godsend, as it meant she could stay off of the streets for longer.

'As soon as I pop up I'll be spotted and I don't have enough chakra for a henge.' She cursed herself for having spent her only available chakra in making sure she'd put Kisame down for a few minutes. Panting, she finally came to a stop, her hands on her knees as she hunched over, attempting to catch her breath. She'd been running on fumes for days and she just wasn't getting any time to recuperate.

'Thank kami I caught that break.' Sakura could hardly believe the plan she'd hatched at the last minute had worked, and even more so that the two men had fallen for it without a single thought, especially Deidara.

Sakura had noticed the night before when her clay based restraints had hardened that they had in fact lost some of their imbued chakra. She'd theorized that if the clay became too dry it meant that it had lost the chakra and may have even lost its explosive capabilities. Sakura knew from the little information she'd been able to gleam about Deidara that he thought of his creations, his jutsu, as a type of 'art'; believing that they were only to exist in mere moments to achieve greatness, hence why he blew them all up.

Sakura doubted he had kept his creations around for such a length of time to know that they would start to degrade, it went against everything he stood for.

'But still, they were too strong for me to be able to break out of with nothing but brute strength.' That's where the lake had come in. It had been a last minute plan but it had come through in the end. The brief dip into the cold, crystal clear water had softened the clay enough to be easily broken. After that, all Sakura needed to do was wait for the perfect time to spring her plan, she had to bring them both close enough to her for their attacks to be useless. Deidara needed room to use his jutsu safely and Kisame needed space to swing Samehada.
Sakura knew that in the end the whole thing would come down to luck.

Luckily enough, it had come out in her favour. Standing back up Sakura decided she had rested for long enough, however, before she could continue her gruelling run through the pipelines that lay under Amegakure, something small, white and moving caught her attention from her peripheral vision.

Fear mixed with a startling sense of shock gripped her stomach in a vice like grip as her breath choked her throat. She recognised that spider. Pushing off into a dead sprint, Sakura was just out of range as the arachnid detonated.

It seemed Sakura had still not learnt her lesson when it came to forgetting about someone as explosive as Deidara.

As the explosion reverberated throughout the city, the Iwagakure missing-nin swooped overhead, perched on the back of a slender, canary look alike creation. A malicious lopsided grin twisted his delicate features, although the purple, throbbing bruise swelling up on his jaw damaged its intimidating effect. He circled the towering plume of smoke caused by one of his little sentry spiders as he pressed a finger to the wireless radio strapped around his throat.

"Explosion in the North-West section, she's still in the pipes, yeah. Do you want me to pursue?" His tone was filled to the brim with desire to simply strip-bomb the entire area and be done with it.

Whatever was conveyed back to Deidara through the wireless radio was obviously not what he wanted to hear. Eye's narrowing and a sneer curling his top lip, he gave his bird the silent command to ascend higher into the sky, a soft, annoyed "yeah" his only response.

"Shit, shit shit!" Was all Sakura could think as she flew down another pipe, her feet making a soft 'tak' as she ran along the dry surface. She didn't know how far away she'd made it, only that she knew it had to have been another ten minutes of running in total. Her body was on fire, every inhalation seared her lungs worse than the last, her knees would quiver if she stopped for too long and every muscle in her body was protesting.

She had pushed her body too hard, but it was the only way Sakura knew she would escape. She had already been weak when the Akatsuki had found her, and she had only degraded further since then. Sakura knew the only thing beating away a severe case of hypothermia was her constant movement, but she knew it wouldn't last for much longer. Though no longer as cold as she had been, she was still wet and clammy.

Panting so hard that Kakashi would be glaring at her from beyond the grave for giving away her cover, she rounded a corner. The sunlight that marked an exit to this hellish landscape of constant tunnels brought with it a sweet relief. As Sakura burst through the end of the pipe, that warm feeling was thoroughly strangled and bled out in front of her eyes, its life seeping away like the colours from her cheeks.

Instead of an exit to the outside of the village and to escape, Sakura had only run blindly into a deep shaft that stretched several stories high above her. The blue, cloud speckled sky above reflected down onto the small layer of water covering the hard concrete at the bottom of the spire. That was not the worse part of this colossal mistake; the worst mistake was running blindly into the company of another Akatsuki member.

He stood before her, his aura nearly overpowering her with nothing more than a stare. His eyes alone nearly seized Sakura's breath, the cold grey alternating with the unusual black rings
consuming every last inch of his sclera. His hair was bright orange and faintly familiar, too familiar for Sakura to be comfortable with the imagines it induced. His skin, pale, broken by black, obsidian bars piercing through his skin in several locations. They lined either side of his nose, six in total with three on each side and six rings per ear with one large bar slid through the entire circumference.

Sakura's skin prickled as his overwhelming chakra ebbed over her, and she knew this was her end.

Sakura's hand came to the sandogasa still residing on her head. Almost feeling a sentimental attachment to the object, she slowly undid the bow at the bottom of her chin so that she could remove it. Taking it off, she held it in front of her, regarding it tired eyes for a few moments.

'We've been through a lot together, haven't we old friend?' Fleeting memories of the past three years slipped through her mind as Sakura resigned herself to her fate. Looking back up to her opponent, she tossed her hat to the side, its edge catching on a small broken pipe jutting out of the ground, choosing to hang there and watch.

Regardless of her current physical condition, Sakura pulled out an old, worn pair of brown leather fingerless gloves. Slipping them into her hands, she felt the familiar creases and cracks form to her hands. It had been a long time since she deemed it necessary to wear these. Sakura had always promised to go down with a fight, and she intended to do just that.

It seemed like the male in front of her had other ideas.

"Haruno Sakura, I have no desire to fight you." His voice was deep and calm; it seemed to settle heavy on her shoulders. Sakura wanted to bite back with a sharply placed jab about how she very much wanted to fight him, but his impressive aura stilled her tongue.

"I extended to you an invitation to join my organization, Akatsuki. I have been informed you have turned this down?" He tilted his head ever so slightly, though his eyes never moved from her.

"Yes." She managed to croak out of a tired and worn throat. He simply nodded.

"Why?" He asked in the same, monotone voice. Sakura nearly started laughing again, but all that managed to escape was a rough cough.

"Do you honestly not see why?" It seemed Sakura's bravado was back full force. "You know who I am? You know who my teammate and best friend was? The fucking ninetails jinchuriki! That's fucking who!" Sakura bit back, any sense of fear dissolved in the storm of her ire.

"You and your organization" The very word was spat with unbridled anger "spent years plaguing his life, constantly stalking him so that he couldn't have one single day of peace. His life was lived in fear. Fear for his loved ones, his country and village, his friends and teammates. That you would rip it all away from him and then take his very life as well." Tears welled within Sakura's eye, but she stood firm. With resolution in her heart she would have her say, she would say the words that had been on her lips for the last three years.

"Naruto was a good man, no, he was a great man. You never saw that." She took a step forward, and the man in front of her narrowed his eyes sharply. "You didn't know who he was, what he went through or all the good he did. He was more than a vessel for the Kyuubi. He was my friend and I loved him." She choked out, her throat becoming tight and hot once more as her emotions threatened to overwhelm her.

"He stood for everything you are against-" "We champion for the good of everyone." Leader
interrupted, his eyelids becoming heavy with conviction.

"We fight against tyranny and oppression. We stand as brothers in arms against those too powerful to be stopped by those weaker than them, those that would abuse their power to bring pain and destruction in the face of selfish desire." He spoke with a profound quality to his voice, calm and deeply rooted in himself whereas Sakura's had been filled with emotion.

"I am sorry for your loss, Haruno-san." It was a misplaced sentiment at this time. "I did not know Uzumaki personally but I do know of his goals and his convictions, for his and mine are the same. We may not go about achieving them the same way, but we both seek peace and safety for those we love." He reached out his hand towards Sakura, his palm facing up towards the sky.

"I am offering you a position to continue on Naruto's dream, through the Akatsuki."

Sakura could nearly choke on the disbelief she felt.

"So you can kill more jinchurikis?" She threw the organizations past deeds back in his face.

"There are no more jinchurikis, Haruno-san." He held up his hand in a 'stop' motion as Sakura opened her mouth to blast him again. "The four remaining tailed beasts were never collected by Akatsuki. The Four, Six and Eight tails were killed by their respective villages when Iwa, Kiri and Kumo begun to fear that Akatsuki was too big of a threat."

Sakura felt sick to her stomach at the revelation, the fact that this was not widespread news in the underground told her that the three villages in question had gone into a full scale cover-up to hide the assassination of their own jinchurikis.

"Akatsuki had planned to seal the tailed beasts so that they would not be used by any village as a weapon to use upon the rest of humanity. There would be no more jinchuriki's, no suffering and deep loneliness for the humans deemed fit to be used as vessels." He paused, his voice solemn.

"However, the Biju will return." Sakura's head snapped to him, her eyes wide and disbelieving. "That is their cycle, they must always return to this plane of existence. Akatsuki will seal them so they cannot be used again."

"Do you see now, Haruno-san?" Sakura couldn't look towards him anymore, turning her head, her eyes closed as she tried to process these revelations. "Do you see what Akatsuki fights against? Akatsuki is in place to stop forces that cannot be stopped."

"Like Konoha?" The words were out of her mouth before she even registered what she was saying. The Akatsuki leader looked at her, his face still as blank as it had been the entire conversation. He gave a slow nod.

"The injustice carried out by the new Hokage is looked down upon. His supposed plans for the village as well as the rest of the shinobi world are also very troubling." His eyebrows pinched and Sakura had to wonder just what kind of information he had on Konoha's future plans.

"I assume you seek revenge on Uchiha Sasuke's past transgression against you and Uzumaki Naruto?" Sakura didn't know how to respond to such an allegation. While she couldn't deny that it had crossed her mind in the three years she had to think about it, but it wasn't the case. Unlike Sasuke, Sakura had come to another conclusion to the age old problem of hate and revenge.

"No. I have seen what revenge does. I have seen the pain and hurt and despair it causes." She started slowly, the emotion building up in her voice.

"In my three years of solitude I have learnt that the route of all pain in this world is selfishness.
The selfish desire to have others, selfish desire for wealth and power, the selfish and all consuming act of revenge. It destroys everything."

"I will not be like Sasuke, I will not walk that path." Sakura's cloudy, jaded eyes seemed to clear in that brief second she peered into him, the fiery emerald scolding his psyche with the depths that it burned to. In that moment Pain knew he would go to great lengths to have Haruno Sakura join Akatsuki.

"Then, Haruno Sakura, would you like your chance for redemption?" He asked one final time, offering her something more than a simple invitation.

Sakura stilled, her breath paused. Redemption was something she'd never thought offered to her, such a concept had been cast from her mind when she had abandoned Konoha, abandoned the body of her teammate behind her as she ran. Her hands quivered at such a thought. The thought of being able to follow a path Naruto would be proud of, to make up for her cowardly actions.

Sakura, the self proclaimed shinobi worth less than trash, was offered a hand to pull herself out of hell with.

"Yes."

Chapter End Notes

Notes:

The man Sakura talks to at the end is of course Pain, Leader of the Akatsuki. This pain I chose is the well known "Deva Path."

A/N It's at the bottom this time because I didn't want to spoil the chapter! I hope to expand more on Sakura's thoughts of Selfishness and Selflessness and how it relates to her idea of happiness in future chapters. And don't worry, you will find out what happened to Konoha, Sasuke and Naruto eventually, but now is not that time.

I also want you to recognize that I'm aware I've changed Akatsuki quite a bit. I've reverted it to more of a twisted version of Yahiko's Akatsuki. I knew Sakura would never want to join an Akatsuki that was describe like how it was in the manga/anime. I still feel like my version of Akatsuki is still very very similar to how the anime/manga version is, only slightly tweaked. There will still be a lot of very difficult moral grey grounds for Sakura to cover in future chapters, as this is still the Akatsuki after all.

There are some pretty startling revelations in this chapter that I hope you all enjoyed! Though they may have caused more answers than questions.
Chapter Summary

Her light destroyed, Sakura now finds herself on a path she never thought she'd take, that of a missing-nin. Rumors of her status are spreading, and one organization has taken notice. Redemption is offered, will it be taken? Will the light of her life be replaced with a catastrophic boom?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Recap**

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"Yes."

**Anxious Thoughts**

Chapter Five

Sakura sat in her assigned bed, her morose eyes gazing out the large window to view the cold, grey landscape of Amegakure, her fingers idly flipping through the glossy pages of a magazine. It had been three days since her acceptance of Pain's invitation and she had spent them tucked up nice and safe within the hospital, recovering from acute hypothermia, starvation, dehydration and chakra depletion. They had also put her through a series of physical and mental health checks to make sure she was fit for duty.

The process had left Sakura oddly content, the procedures all too familiar to the medical-nin. It had been a very long time since she was last in a hospital, and even longer since she had been on the receiving side of the situation. The familiar hustle and bustle of the hospital grounds was a soft reminder of days long since passed, when she had walked the hallways of the Konoha hospital as a resident healer or of the simple days huddled into her study, pouring over medical scrolls and complicated herbal remedies.

While it certainly hadn't always been an easy or joyous place to work, it had still been her second home. A place she was respected and looked up to, where she was firm in the belief that she was a valued member of the senior team.
'It's nice to be surrounded by this atmosphere again.' A part of her silently hoped Pain would station her here, to work within the hospital. She could only speculate as to why he had wanted her in the first place and she knew first and foremost that she had been seen as a great healer, even great enough to rival her teacher, a legendary sannin.

'From what little I know, the Akatsuki do not have any healers within their ranks, but why would you when you have an entire hospital at your disposal?' She bit her thumb in thought, her eyes losing focus on the outside world 'I suppose you can't take an entire hospital team on missions with you, especially as it seems Akatsuki is an organization kept separate from Amegakure's general business.'

Sakura knew that in the end, her answer would lie with Pain; It was simply a question that would have to be asked at another time.

Sakura was broken from her general musings about the organization she had just joined as the door to her private hospital room swung in softly, a portly, short man with large, circular spectacles sitting on a rather round nose announcing his entrance in due course. However, it was the woman with striking blue hair who followed him in that greatly caught her attention. The woman was not intimidating in either looks or stature, but there was a certain crackle of electricity in the air around her that Sakura was wary of. She had been in the company of many powerful shinobi, and they all seemed to have the exact same aura. It didn't help that she was also clad in the familiar Akatsuki cloak.

Sitting up a little straighter, Sakura gave a slightly forced, stiff smile to her new guests.

"Good morning, Haruno-san, how are you feeling today?" The man asked as he selected a clipboard from the container hanging from the end of her bed.

"My chakra is back to its full capacity, I'm sufficiently hydrated and nourished and any minor injuries I sustained have been healed. My sleep was deep and uninterrupted, I have finished all meals without being sick and have urinated twice this morning. I assume all my blood tests came back clean." Sakura finished reciting her meal checklist, knowing indepth how this final procedure would proceed. The portly man seemed pleased as he continued checking off his own list attached to the clipboard, satisfied that he wouldn't have to go through the long spiel of asking questions and receiving an answer.

"That's excellent, Haruno-san, I'm glad to see you have recovered from your ordeal quickly." He finished by brandishing the clipboard at her, pen being offered in his adjacent hand. "Please sign off at the bottom and you will be cleared and ready for discharge."

With an elegant flourish Sakura signed the paper work.

"Excellent!" The man chirped again, taking the clipboard back from her, ready to toddle off to finish filing the paper work. "Your clothing is on the cabinet, Haruno-san, you are free to leave whenever you wish." And as the door closed behind him, Sakura was free to move around for the first time in three days without supervision. Save for the Akatsuki cloaked woman still standing at the end of her bed, face as serious as Pain's had been.

Tossing the white linen from herself, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and jumped off, absentmindedly ripping her hospital check-in wristband off. Walking over to the cabinet, she gave a soft sigh of relief to find her clothing washed and folded neatly in front of her, her shoes on the floor to the side of it. Her sandogasa nowhere in sight.

As she reached for the pile of clothing, she was interrupted as another bundle of cloth fell with
soft, muffled thump. Startled, she looks over to her right to see the blue haired woman with her hand outstretched, having just dumped the new outfit in front of her.

"Your new uniform, Haruno-san." Breaking eye contact away from those startling amber eyes, Sakura glanced down at her new outfit. Her fingers wrapped around the first item, an undershirt of ninja chainmail and held it up for a quick appraisal. Glancing back to Konan, Sakura waited to see if the older woman would leave the room and allow her to change in private. After a brief three second stare off, Sakura resigned herself to the fact that she wasn't leaving anytime soon.

'It's not the first time, Sakura.' She thought morosely to herself, her fingers coming to undo the simple knots holding her hospital gown on. She was right, though, modesty was not a trait that lasted long with most shinobi, there would be plenty of missions that would wear down such a naive concept until there came a point where a ninja could simply walk through the middle of town butt naked with no worries whatsoever. Bodies were weapons, first and foremost, for shinobi. Unless you were strictly used in those kind of espionage mission your physical appearance played no role in your work as a ninja.

Sakura could remember all too well her first lesson in how vanity could kill a ninja; her hand brushed against her soft locks she had since let down, as the memory slipped through her mind's eye.

'My thoughts and opinions have changed a lot since those genin days.' She thought softly as her gown slipped from her shoulders and crumpled to the ground, exposing her hard, scarred body. Sakura's body was that of a shinobi based mostly in hand to hand combat, her muscles hard and defined against her small frame. Any fat content she had was focused in the middle section of her body, the thighs, hips and abdomen, though certainly not enough to hide the definition of the muscles that lay underneath.

Scars permeated her body, a tell-tale signs that she took more chances than a shinobi at her level should. Her arms seemed to have the highest density, all in a different stage of healing, though the most noticeable was a large atrophic scar that curved under her deltoid on the right arm. Her arms also seemed to be a place of curiosity for Konan, as the woman's eyes seemed to affix to them. Sakura felt slightly self-conscious, knowing her arms were seen as unsightly to a lot, especially amongst kunoichi who almost seemed to prize their physical appearance as a sign of their strength.

'Anko was always jealous.' A small voice piped up in her head and Sakura nearly cracked a smile at the memory of the enthusiastic if not brutal kunoichi taking the time to hang off of Sakura's well-muscled biceps. Pushing the thoughts back down, Sakura picked up a binder to secure her small breasts flat to her chest before picking up the chainmail and slipping it on. The navy three quarter length shirt was pulled on next, the neckline swooping down low under her collar bone to allow the chainmail underneath to peak out. The navy coloured pants were next.

Her eyes warily ducked to the black, knee length boots that sat on the floor, a pair of white chaps draped across them. She instead reached down to grasp her old, dirty, off white boots on the other side of the cabinet. Konan said nothing. Pulling them on she felt her feet slide back into the grooves she had worn in over the years, the threadbare sole doing little to support her feet.

'I should really get new ones.' She thought to herself off handedly, tugging the boots up until the top came to rest just below her knees. Standing up straight again, she turned to Konan, gazing back into the woman's stern, amber eyes. The blue haired woman's eyes flicked back to the cabinet, staring down the last article of clothing left. A piece of clothing Sakura hadn't been quite ready to put on yet.

Sakura followed her gaze, her cloudy jade eyes resting on the black cloak that seeped with red clouds. She had yet to resign herself to the decision she had made. She waived in her next
movement slightly and Konan's eyes snapped back to her. Sakura's had reached for the cloak, her fingers digging into the soft material as she pulled it up. She took a brief second to contemplate what exactly this cloak stood for before such thoughts were extinguished.

Firm in her resolve once more the cloak slipped around her, sitting heavily upon her shoulders as the ramifications of her decision to join Akatsuki came crashing down around her.

She took one deep, steady breath to centre herself before she gazed back at Konan, the woman giving her a soft, accepting nod as if pleased with her resolve.

"My name is Konan, Haruno-san, I am Leaders partner." She spoke smoothly, a soft, respectful bow of the head following the introduction. Sakura returned it, this was, after all, her new comrade.

"Please, call me Sakura, Konan-sama." Sakura tagged on the respectful suffix, treating Konan with the same respect she would extend to her new Leader.

'New Leader.' The idea made her heart pulsate painfully, but it was gone as quickly as it came. Konan didn't seem to notice, instead she gave another nod, a small smile quirking her lips before she spun around and strode towards the door.

"Come then, Sakura-san. You are to attend your first meeting." Sakura begun to amble along, shooting a final glance at the clothing she left behind, a sense of dread beginning to build in her throat.

The sky was cloudy and dark as they ambled further down the tight streets and deeper into the village's centre. Unlike Sakura's first guided foray into the city lead by Deidara and Kisame - 'That's going to be an awkward reunion.' - the streets of Amegakure seemed to bustle with life. People ambled around happily, neighbours talking to neighbours, street side restaurants packed and crowded by rowdy customers.

Although it didn't escape Sakura's eyes to see how she and Konan were watched. It was hard not to when the vast crowds seemed to part before your very eyes. It seemed the Akatsuki and Konan in particular garnered huge respect within the city, and Sakura had to wonder what kind of part they played. It hadn't escaped her notice that all of the Amegakure nin they had encountered sported the same slashed hitai-ate;

"What is Akatsuki's involvement with Amegakure?" Sakura asked softly to her new comrade, her eyes curiously roving over a band of drunk Ame nin stumbling out of a road-side Izakaya.

"We are the saviours of Amegakure." The revelation caused Sakura's head to snap back to Konan, her eyes betraying her growing curiosity and thirst for knowledge.

"Akatsuki was formed during the Third Great Shinobi War to fight the oppression and tyranny Amegakure faced under the rule of Hanzo. After we successfully liberated Amegakure, the Ame nin welcomed us as their new leaders. In a sign of solidarity they cast off their ties to the old way of Ame and defaced their Hitai-ate." The news was astonishing and Sakura couldn't even begin to believe how exactly this kind of revolution went under way with no other village hearing word of it. A coup of a Hidden Village had happened and no one even knew about it.

'Is this the kind of power Akatsuki has?' It was in that moment Sakura knew she hadn't even skimmed the surface of the power Akatsuki wielded. 'Do they really have the means to be able to change the world?' Sakura couldn't help but feel a faint glimmer of hope spark in her chest, the possibility of Naruto's dream for a peaceful, better world now seemingly tangible before her.
"Since that moment, Pain has ruled Amegakure peacefully." Konan finished, her eyes sliding over to woman who walked at her side. Sakura nodded again, but her eyes were firmly affixed to the large, towering obelisk that now stretched out before them. The spire seemed to jut out harshly from those surrounding it, though not through height. It kept within the same height range as the buildings surrounding it, some even spiralling higher than it. The one difference, however, was the large, intimidating face that brandished its tongue harshly out into the world for all to see, the head sitting atop the shoulders of the building.

Sakura already knew this was their destination.

As they made their way up the short stack of stairs at the front, Sakura's eyebrows pinched together in a look of concern. There seemed to be no door, so she paused in her steps, under the cusp of the tower. Unlike her, Konan did not falter in her steps, striding forward until she was a step feet in front, a blank wall in front of her. Delicate, pale hand raised she pressed it to the cold concrete, a spark of chakra flared and an ornate seal spiralled into existence. Sakura watched on, not familiar with such a technique.

As the spiraling tendrils of the seal reached the corner edges of the wall, they begun to travel along it, forming a square. When they had reached the other side, connecting the paths, an ebb of chakra surged through the detailed script, activating the seal. A crease seemed to slowly form along the middle of the wall, stretching from top to bottom and dividing the seal into two parts. As the seal completed its work of making a doorway into the tower, it begun to fade.

Sakura would not be able to watch as the seal spiraled back into itself, as Konan pushed through the heavy, concrete doors and into the depths of the tower. Sakura followed suit.

The hallways were dark and cold and mildly off putting. No light source permeated the depths except for the lightbulbs stationed just that bit too far away from each other. No natural light could seep in, as there was no windows in sight. The tower wasn't exactly cold, but the stillness made up for it, every little sound seemingly magnified because of it. Sakura hoped it was only the lower levels of the tower that were like this.

Instead of going higher into the building like Sakura had thought, they instead ventured down, under Sakura knew they would be well unground the city of the village. As if picking up on her thoughts, Konan turned her head to face her, but never pausing in her steps,

"The meetings are generally held down here, but the living quarters are above us." Konan's eyes flicked back in front of her for a brief second before focusing on Sakura again. "There's light up there." Sakura felt her face relax, though the rest of her body stayed wound continued on for a brief minute before they turned a corner and Sakura was greeted by a vast room, much more well lit than the hallways they had just descended through. All the room seemed to hold was a rather large sweeping staircase that descended down further to a set of towering doors.

The doors were almost overwhelming in their stature, their bright red colour piercing compared against the grey metal that the tower seemed to be made of. Two large Oni masks gazed back at Sakura, and the seals upon their forehead made Sakura wary.

'It seems this isn't an ordinary door.' But Sakura had more pressing things to worry about, like the seemingly overwhelming chakra that oozed out from under the door. It was unusual to feel so many high chakra signals all in one place, so unabashedly flaring out. Normally the higher the chakra signal, the more capable the nin is at hiding it, so why they were all so brazenly displaying it left Sakura on edge.

"It's a pissing contest." Konan caught Sakura's attention with her slightly vulgar language. Konan
seemed amused, the first emotion Sakura had seen grace her face since this walk had begun. "It's rare we have all of the members in one place, so when they do ever get together it devolves into a giant pissing contest as to who is the more powerful one. Juvenile." Konan finished with a short snort before she begun to descend the stairs.

Sakura waivered, her feet not moving to carry her after Konan. The blue haired woman stopped five stairs down from the top and turned, one foot still on the stair behind her. She gazed at Sakura as the medical-nin fussed with the end of sleeve, avoiding eye contact.

It was in this moment that Konan seemed to realize just how hard this whole thing had been on the younger woman. Konan had been brought up to date the night previously to all that Sakura had seemingly been through, the loss of her comrades, her friends and even her village. Her heart had ached for the coral haired woman, knowing the pain she had gone through all too well. Unlike Sakura, Konan had many, many years to adjust to this way of life, but Sakura was still new to such things.

'It probably doesn't help that the men lying behind the doors tried to kill her and her comrades on more than one occasion, then proceeded to abduct her.'

"Sakura-san." Konan started her voice much softer than usual as she reached out to the younger woman. It seemed to do the trick as Sakura slowly turned to face Konan. "They will not hurt you." Sakura's cheek flushed red against her will, embarrassed that Konan had picked up on her reason for delay. Konan took another step towards Sakura.

"Regardless of your past, the men beyond these doors are now you teammates, they are your brothers in arms and your comrades above all else. Although you may not agree with them or even like them, we expect all of you to behave professionally. While we understand you will not be able to forget the past, we hope you will be able to move past it. They-" Konan motioned towards the door with a slight wave of her hand "have been told the same."

Sakura gave a nod before she begun to descend the stairs, but as she came to stand on the same steps as Konan, she felt the older woman's hand reach out to grasp her by the sleeve, further halting her descent. Slightly surprised Sakura gazed at Konan only to find herself further surprised at the woman's amber eyes now alight with life, nearly too much for Sakura to be able to look into.

"If you ever feel threatened, if anything ever happens you are to come directly to me. You will be given means to contact either myself or Pain directly if the need should arise." Konan's head dipped lower, coming closer to Sakura.

"Use it."

With that Konan released the edge of Sakura's sleeve she had been holding and resumed descending the stairs, Konan following suit. As they came to stand in front of the towering doors, the Oni's eyes moved abruptly, focusing squarely on her. Sakura felt trepidation rise within her throat but shoved it down.

'God damn it I am a kunoichi, I could punched square through these damn doors with a flick of my finger.' That seemed to do the trick of bolstering Sakura's spirit as she strode forward, as Konan held her right hand up to the door again, seemingly showing off what looked like an inconsequential ring. It was obviously something a lot more important than what it seemed, as the doors seemed to acknowledge this and began to creak open.

Konan shot one last look at Sakura before she strode through the part in the door.
Sakura followed.

The sight that was laid out before her was one Sakura thought she'd never see unless it meant she was less than three seconds away from death, for there before her surrounding a large, sprawling rectangular table was every member of the Akatsuki she knew about, plus some.

All looking at her.

'I am beginning to have second thoughts on this.' She kept her face blank of such emotions, knowing that if she showed weakness or apprehension now, it would be as good as jumping into a shark tank in a steak bikini. Leader stood from his seat at the head of the table, both hands held behind his back as he gave a nod to the newest arrivals.

"I'm glad to see you have fully recovered, Haruno-san." Sakura gave a respectful bow as he addressed her, her eyes remaining steadfastly upon the floor. There were a few gazes in this room she'd rather die than meet.

"Please, have a seat." Pain motioned towards the lone, empty seat beside a very large, intimidating man Sakura would come to know as Zetsu. Maybe it was the giant flytrap apparatus clinging to his shoulders, or maybe it was the unsettling two-tone skin, but Sakura knew she would like to stay very, very far away from this man. Pain gave a nod as he resumed his speech, addressing key points about intel they had received about Takigakure.

As attention seemed to drift away from her and back to Pain, Sakura felt her shoulders relax. Glancing up, she was immediately caught in the rich auburn eyes of a man she had hoped to never see again.

'Sasori.' Came the soft, abhorrent whisper through her mind, her gut clenching tight and her fingers fisting in the material of her sleeves. His gaze was strictly kept to her, as if blocking out the rest of the world around him, his eyes reverently slithering over her features. Sakura did well in suppressing the shiver of disgust that rolled over her body.

'To think Chiyo-baasama thought him emotionless, like a puppet.' Or perhaps their meeting had evoked something Sasori thought long forgotten. Not wishing to subject herself to his repulsing gaze any longer, Sakura flicked her eyes to Sasori's left to find the blond haired man she'd slugged three days ago.

'By the look of that bruise, he's still feeling it.' Sakura had to feel a little bit proud of her work, the bruise was still deep and purple, only the edges starting to fade to an unsightly yellow. A brief wonder as to why he hadn't simply had it healed slipped through her mind.

"I would like to introduce our newest member, Haruno Sakura." The sentence snapped her out of her thoughts as her head snapped to look at Pain. As all attention fell on her, Sakura stood from her seat, dropping into a respectful bow in front of her new comrades.

"It is nice to meet you all, I hope we all get along well." It was a stiff lipped introduction and one that had zero ounce of truth in it, but Sakura had been raised with civility and manners that persevered, even in such a bizarre situation.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." Sakura's head turned to the source of such casual vulgarity; the hair on the back of her neck prickled as she met the deep plum coloured eyes of the man addressing her with such distaste in his voice.

"Hidan." It was a stiff reprimand that had Sakura's toes curling as she suddenly wished to be in
any other room than this. Hidan’s head turned to the man that had just addressed him, his eyebrows raising in disbelief.

"You’ve got to be fucking kidding me." He spoke again, amused disbelief in his voice before his face contorted in unsuppressed anger. Sakura did not like where this was going.

"She’s got fucking bright pink hair!" He stood roughly, his chair scraping across the floor loudly as his hand pointed at her; his eyes remained focused solely on Pain. Sakura took a step back as her chair pushed out further from behind her, her eyes narrowing on Hidan as she waited to see if she’d need to act.

"Hidan, you will not address your new comrade like that." The underlying current in Pain’s voice was unsettlingly and Sakura felt like this room was far too small all of a sudden.

"Hidan, sit down." The imposing man that had been sitting beside Hidan was now looking up at his teammate, his bright green irises surrounded by unusually coloured sclera half hidden by his annoyed glare.

"You, shut the fuck up." Hidan broke stare down with Pain for a brief second to address his partner before he resumed it once more. "If you think for a fucking second I’m teaming up with that-" He brandished his giant weapon at her, the blatant threat of such a move causing Sakura's own anger to spike, greedily consuming any sense of fear or apprehension she had.

"Do not point that at me-" Her eyes narrowed as Hidan turned to her, his lips curling back in a snarl as she interrupted him. Sakura raised her own arm, limply pointing a finger at him "or you will regret it."

The room burst as a flurry of movement exploded at the end of Sakura's own subtle threat. Hidan lashed forward over the table, bringing his scythe up above his head. There was a flurry of paper erupting like a snow storm from behind him but Sakura was too busy focusing on the threat in front of her to see where it came from. Kisame’s Samehada smug low, attempting to incapacitate Hidan at the legs but it seemed like Hidan had expected that, simply using the massive sword as a stepping stone for a high jump, obviously planning on cleaving Sakura in two with downward swing of his three pronged scythe.

It was the opening Sakura had been waiting for. Leaping forward she propelled herself off the chair behind her, a fist reared back and already subconsciously pumped full of chakra for a devastating blow. Sakura met Hidan over the middle of the table; she was far too close for his scythe to be of any use to him anymore. Her fist slammed into his sternum with a deafening boom as the chakra in her fist released into his body. The explosive discharge sent him flying backwards until his now limp body slammed into the wall behind him, creating a deep, sunken crater.

As his body slid to the floor Sakura landed squarely on the table, her fist still angrily clenched. Her fierce eyes were narrowed as she watched Hidan cough, blood splattering down the front of his cloak and onto the ground.

"I am the apprentice of Tsunade-Sama, Fifth Hokage of Konohagakure, one of the three Legendary Sannin and celebrated as one of the strongest Kunoichi to ever exist. I have been in the presence of women and men far stronger than you." Sakura sneered, thick malice and killing intent rolling off her body as she pointed a harsh finger down at the bleeding, broken mess that was once Hidan. "I will not be so easily threatened, especially by a cur like you."

The laugh that came next nearly broke Sakura's cool, fierce demeanor.

'\textit{That punch should have easily broken his ribs, and the blood indicated that his lungs had been}'
punctured, he shouldn't be laughing I could have easily fucking killed him with such a hit.' It just
made Sakura even angrier. Hidan looked up, blood still dribbling out of his mouth as he flashed
Sakura his blood stained teeth, which seemed to be more of a threat than a smile. His plum
coloured eyes seemed to be alight with life, obviously taking glee in the punishment he'd just been
dealt for his out of line behaviour.

"I like you." It was a shocking statement to hear and a first for Sakura. Hearing someone proclaim
such a thin after having their chest caved in was unusual. She simply blinked before turning
around and jumping off the table. Straightening her clothing, she placed her seat back in place and
sat down, once more aware that all the attention was focused solely back on her.

"I hope this covers any questions you may have had about Haruno-san's capabilities." Pain's voice
was back to its normal monotone as he watched Hidan scrap himself off the floor and back into
his seat. As the rest remained quiet, Sakura assumed it did.

"Haruno-san." Pain addressed her specifically, his eyes dropping to her face. Sakura's back
stiffened, wondering if this was going to mean retribution for striking down Hidan. "While you
have been welcomed into Akatsuki." I wouldn't quite call that welcoming. "we still cannot refer
to you as a full member." Sakura's eyebrows pinched in confusion and thought, wondering what a
statement like that could mean.

"The Akatsuki are all tied together with these." He raised his right hand, a ring similar to Konan's
wrapped around his thumb, the kanji for 'zero' proudly embossed on the gem within its centre.
Sakura's eyes flicked around the room, easily identifying the rings on each of the members hands.

'Only nine in total, that means...'

"The tenth ring belonged to Orochimaru." Sakura's hand fist ed in his cloak, the name bringing up
a slew of memories and emotions from within her. Her face remained blank as she became tangled
within old thoughts. "He defected many years ago and his ring was never recovered. Your first
mission as an Akatsuki member is to retrieve the ring he left behind in his death. We believe it to
be in his eastern hideout within the borders of Otogakure as this was his last known location. This
was where he fell by Uchiha Sasuke's hands several years ago." Pain finished as tossed a scroll
towards her, Sakura catching it with ease. She unraveled it slowly, her eyes pouring over the
information that had been collected, possible locations, any problems they may face, estimated
times and so on and so forth.

"You will be paired for Sasori-san and Deidara-san for this mission." Sakura's head snapped back
up, her wide eyes betraying her turbulent emotions on being paired with a man that had tried so
hard to kill her and make her into one of his precious dollies. "Sasori-san has extensive knowledge
on Orochimaru, as he was his last partner before his defection from Akatsuki. He is aware of what
kind of traps Orochimaru may have set up as well as knowledge on where the ring may be
located. Deidara-san's abilities will make sure you complete this mission within a short time frame.
We need this ring back at the earliest possible time, Haruno-san." Pain finished, giving more of an
explanation than he needed to.

"I assume this will not be a problem." Pain's eyes fell heavily upon Sakura, his eyelids drooping
slightly to give her a narrow, pointed look.

"No, Leader-sama." Sakura replied, stealing her resolve as she turned to face her two, new
partners for this mission.

Sasori looked positively gleeful.
Notes:

So yeah, Sakura is absolutely ripped in my variation of her. I like to think she worked very hard for her physical strength and didn't rely fully on her chakra, it would be silly to be an absolutely weak taijutsu user if you didn't have any chakra to back it up. This Sakura can hold her own, chakra or not.

Did you know that the 'fishnet' you see in the manga and anime isn't actually fishnet? It's chainmail!
Her light destroyed, Sakura now finds herself on a path she never thought she'd take, that of a missing-nin. Rumors of her status are spreading, and one organization has taken notice. Redemption is offered, will it be taken? Will the light of her life be replaced with a catastrophic boom?

Recap

"You will be paired for Sasori-san and Deidara-san for this mission." Sakura's head snapped back up, her wide eyes betraying her turbulent emotions on being paired with a man that had tried so hard to kill her and make her into one of his precious dollies. "Sasori-san has extensive knowledge on Orochimaru, as he was his last partner before his defection from Akatsuki. He is aware of what kind of traps Orochimaru may have set up as well as knowledge on where the ring may be located. Deidara-san's abilities will make sure you complete this mission within a short time frame. We need this ring back at the earliest possible time, Haruno-san." Pain finished, giving more of an explanation than he needed to.

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Unusual Thoughts

Chapter Six

As the meeting had come to an end and Sakura had been given the leave date of her mission -no later than the following night- she had been shepherded through her new residence. Konan had taken her up and around even bend and crook of the entire tower and Sakura didn't think she'd remember a single room, save for her own. While the rest of the tower had been lighter than what she'd previously experienced, it was still morosely depressing in its minimalistic, cold, grey style. The windows where small, few in numbers and the only view they gave were shining neon lights, metal infrastructure and drizzly grey clouds.

'It's this kind of environment that can drive people to kill themselves.' Sakura thought to herself, her mind running over a study she had read years ago about how environmental factors can affect mental stability. She gave a sniff as she felt her nose begin to run, the wet weather already getting to her. Her eyes remained steadfastly on the world that laid beyond her window as she sat upon
her small, single bed. Her room had been the last on the tour and Konan had let her retire for the
day and it is where Sakura had remained; skipping lunch to simply think about her life.

It had been a very long time since Sakura had been able to sit and think; to remember.

She closed her eyes as her mind faded back into the grey fog of her memories, her heart coming to
a slow thud as her consciousness ebbed.

'Do you remember where this all started?' She asked herself, her throat aching and burning at the
mere mention of the start of all this. 'How could I forget.'

'The day had been like any other day in Konoha, the sun bright, the wind gentle and the clouds
nowhere in sight. The air was filled with a light and vibrancy.' The idyllic scene seemed to spring
to life behind Sakura's eyes, even if the edges were a little blurred and she couldn't quite remember
all of the small details. 'We were in the training grounds, all three of us. Naruto, Sasuke and I.'

'We'd just finished training.' And out of nowhere, Sasuke and Naruto seemed to materialize, the
two laughing and smiling in a way Sakura had become use to over the six months they had had
Sasuke back. It had been a foreign and unsettling thing the first time it happened, the first time
they'd seen Sasuke laugh and smile.

'Naruto was the only one that could do it.' Sakura thought to herself, as if that should have been a
warning. The two figures in her thoughts had their backs to her, the two large, now adult, males
sitting on a felled log not to far from her. 'But then...' The scene seemed to change, the air stilled, the leaves stopped rustling and her breath seemed to
leave her body as Sasuke turned to look over his shoulder towards her. The arm he had slung over
Naruto's shoulder in a friendly, close way seemed to drag back towards him, a spark of lightning
coursing through his arm as his eyes connected with hers, the light fading as a deep, foreboding
red swirling into existence and-

The loud, stern knock broke her from her thoughts as she gave a large gasp, her lung greedily
grasped for air. Sakura had been unaware she'd been holding her breath to help slow her heart
even further in her meditative state, her cheeks flushed red from the exertion. She jammed the heel
of her palms into her eyes as she rubbed furiously, hoping to stem any tears that may have tried to
well up during her pleasant trip down memory lane. It seemed her eyes had given up on tears long
ago as she felt nothing but dry skin in her efforts.

"Sakura." The unmistakable purred resonated from beyond the door, a voice that had haunted
Sakura's nightmares for years as a teenager.

'Sasori.' Her mind responded in kind, her whole body tensing. Her eyes flicked around the room
looking for any possible escape, but she realized that doing so wouldn't bode well in the eyes of
her new leader. 'I suppose it's time for me to face this old dream head on.' She thought to herself
as she stood, steadily and cautiously making her way towards her door.

Today had been a day of confronting her past, so she may as well continue the theme.

Her hand hovered over the cold, metal doorknob as another knock resounded throughout her
room 'Wood on wood.' Came the small, amused thought from deep within her mind. It managed to
put a small quirk of a smile on her lips, but it was gone as soon as she whipped the door open,
stopping Sasori mid knock.

It amused Sakura greatly when she had to look down to make eye contact with the puppet that had
tried so hard to kill her and his own grandmother so many years ago. His glassy-literally
glass-eye's gazed up at her, they're constantly half lidded state doing little to relieve Sakura of his intense, dead gaze.

'Though,' She thought as she met his stare 'It's not as worrying as that smile.'

"Good afternoon, Sakura" The casual use of her name didn't escape her as her eyes narrowed on the pathetic little puppet boy, her hand tightening upon the door handle she held until it nearly cracked. 'He has no right to use-

"And I do so hope that you don't mind me calling you Sakura" He said her name like it was a wisp of smoke on the wind, the same freezing breeze that snaked its way up Sakura's spine and set her on edge. "I think we can extend that kind of respect to each other, seeing as how we met in battle and traded blows, both living, if only just." He raised his hand, his pointer finger hovering above his thumb as if to show by how little they had both managed to live.

"I stabbed you, you created an antidote for my poison," His eyelids dropped even more, but the eye contact remained intense. "quid pro quo, as some would say."

"What do you want, Sasori?" Though he may have spoken her name with respect, she certainly did not extend the same respect to him. He didn't seem to notice or care as his head cocked to the side, giving Sakura that sense of uncomfortableness that she'd later identify as the dip of the 'Uncanny Valley'.

"We-" Sakura's eyes dodged to the left, spotting Deidara who had been reclined against the wall, watching the scene unfold with amusement visible in his lone eye and a glowing purple bruise on his cheek. "are here to discuss mission details."

"There is nothing to discuss." 'Lies.' "We leave tomorrow at daybreak, fly east until we arrive at the co-ordinates, descend into the Eastern hideout recover the ring and go. Previous scouting missions have detected no viable life within the hideout, there should be no danger from previous oto-nin."

"Orochimaru would not leave such a place untampered with." Sasori countered, obviously not impressed with Sakura's casual brush off.

"I've dealt with his traps before, it was my team that destroyed his Kusagakure hideout." Sakura leaned forward ever so slightly, her eyes still focused squarely on Sasori. Sasori simply nodded, though not at all impressed with Sakura's plan.

"I assume you have all the equipment you need then." The amused undertone in his voice came back with a vengeance and Sakura knew he knew she didn't have anything. 'That's exactly why he said it.' All her equipment had been confiscated and left abandoned somewhere above Kaishoku Gake when Deidara and Kisame had abducted her. Sakura absentmindedly fingered the fat stack of ryo Konan had left her with in order to buy new gear; it had been more than Sakura had held in over three years.

But Sakura had no idea where to buy anything.

"No." Sakura bit out through clenched teeth, not liking to admit a fault to a long-time nemesis.

"Come then." Sasori replied as he turned and walked down the hallway, passing Deidara who fell into step behind him. Sakura waivered, shooting a glance back into her room to see if there was anything she should take, anything she was leaving behind.

"I do not like being kept waiting, Sakura." Sasori's voice travelled back down the hallway towards her and Sakura couldn't repress the snarl that curled her lips.
She followed.

Sakura scrambled through the crowds, trying to keep as close to Sasori and Deidara as she could. It seemed her cloak gave her some respect within Amegakure, most of the people surrounding her seemed to try and at least make way for her, their rain soaked umbrellas bumping into others. As the rain fell in a soft torrent, it bounced from the tops of the umbrellas and ran down onto Sakura, leaving her wet in odd spots. She tried to keep under the eaves of the shops, but it wasn’t doing much when the rain would simply splatter up from underneath them.

Deidara was close in front of her, using the eaves of the shops for the same coverage, but he was having the same problems as her. His wet fringe stuck to the left side of his face, plastering over his scope, a few scant beads of water getting stuck to the aubergine skin of his bruised right cheek. Sakura heard him huff in annoyance as he grabbed the bottom part of his fringe and flicked it out of his face, revealing the scope beneath.

There was once a time Sakura thought he might have reminded her of Ino, the long hair, the graceful beauty, the soft blue eyes and that slightly bitchy look they both seemed to hold in their mouth, but Sakura couldn’t see the resemblance now. It could be that she hadn’t see Ino in so many years that she could hardly remember what she looked like apart from the glaringly obvious details, or it could be because Deidara had that distinctly masculine neck and shoulder width.

His skin was flawless, not a mark within sight; no stray nicks or mars. *Advantage of being a long range fighter.* Sakura thought to herself, slightly jealous. His bronze skin was flecked with water, but entirely out of place among the pale complexions of those that surrounded them now. It told her of the years he had spent under the sun’s rays, tanning his skin until it was such a vibrant, rich hue of brown.

*Remind me to check for skin cancer.* Her mind reverted back to clinical medication evaluation to try and avoid noting the obvious, that Deidara was a very, very attractive man and she hadn’t been touched in years.

"Hurry up, don’t keep me waiting." Sasori remarked amidst the downpour of rain, his small stature all but lost within the swirl of people. The puppet boy hadn’t seemed to care about the rain, walking headstrong into the storm to let it soak him through and through.

*I assume he doesn’t feel the cold or the rain, let alone fear for any kind of sickness it would cause.* Sakura’s mind clutched onto something else to evaluate, desperate to get away from thoughts of the artist in front of her. Attraction was not something she needed in her life right now, it was turbulent and confusing enough as it was.

"Fuck this, yeah." Deidara bitched to himself silently before stepping out into the rain, his elbow connecting with the side of an Ame-nin as he grasped at the nins umbrella. Tearing it from the nins hand, Deidara cast him a foul look, dismissing any kind of retaliation from the other man. The man scampered away, knowing it was not a fight worth picking. Deidara, pleased with his new prize, strode into the crowd after Sasori.

Sakura cursed herself as she looked for a way to follow that wouldn’t end in her being absolutely soaked. She’d danced with hypothermia once this week and she was not ready for a encore.

"Hurry up, yeah?" Deidara snapped back at her as he waited, cutting her a stern glance as he waved at the other, empty side of his new canopy. Sakura took her chance and ducked under his umbrella, safe from the rain. Chancing a glance up at the taller male, Sakura was slightly relieved
to see him not looking back at her. Although it did give her a good chance to see his bruise up close.

"I can fix that for you." It was a soft invitation that was nearly drowned out from the thrum of the rain hitting the top of the umbrella. Deidara simply cast her an unreadable look as they both followed after the path Sasori had left, the red haired puppet not waiting for them to catch up.

"No, yeah." Sakura's face deadpanned as she met his gaze.

"I mean no." His eyebrows pinched and the corners of his mouth turned down in a juvenile pout. "I'm a very experienced healer, Tsunade-sama was my teacher in medical jutsu. It wouldn't take more than five-" "I said no." Sakura bit her tongue and simply turned her face forward once again, her attempt at reaching out with an apology rebuked.

"Look, I'm s-" "Holy shit, are you about to apologise to me, yeah?" As Deidara interrupted her again, Sakura bit down on her tongue even harder, tasting blood mingle with her saliva. Her eyebrows pinched together as her eyes narrowed, looking back up at the taller, tan ex Iwa-nin. "If you were about to apologise for socking me in the jaw" He paused to point at the healthy bruise. "I'd call you a fucking idiot, yeah." Sakura felt her temper flare.

"I'm so sorry for wanting to apologise for my actions so that we could start off on a new foot as teammates." Sakura bit back as they ducked under an eave, following Sasori into a large building that was filled with even more people. Deidara gave her an amused look as he picked up on her sarcastic tone. He dropped the umbrella from over their heads as they were now safely inside and away from the rain. He gave the umbrella a soft shake and a spin to discard the excess water clinging to the grooves before folding it up to carry under an arm.

"You're a shinobi, yeah? Beating the shit out of each other is what we do." He strode forwards towards where Sasori had stopped about ten feet in front of them, within the large shaft that seemed to hollow out the middle of the large spire, shops of all kinds lining the walls on every level all the way up to the ceiling. "I would have lost respect for you if you hadn't tried to escape."

He spun around to face her, but continued walking backwards towards Sasori. He brought his hands up, palms facing towards her in a placating pose. "Consider it water under the bridge, yeah?" At this point in time, Sakura would have normally have paid attention to what he just said, but instead her eyes remained steadfastly glued to the centre of his palms, as two pink, slick tips breached the soft edge of his pseudo-mouths. As the twin tongue lewdly gyrated at her, Sakura balked, her head rearing back.

Deidara simply laughed as he turned to face his master, a sly grin on his face.

It was three hours later and Sakura had barely put a dent in the thick stack of ryo Konan had given to her, not that she hadn't tried if the slew of bags hanging off her left arm had anything to say. Her bags were overflowing with the latest medical text books, scrolls, weaponry and spare sets of clothing. She'd also managed to find a rather suspicious store that sold a lot of medical equipment and had spent copious amounts of time deciding what she'd buy and for what occasions.

'There was a rather dilapidated medical bay in the tower that could do with a spruce up.' She absentmindedly thought to herself, pondering whether or not she'd be able to convert it into her own little office.

Sasori and Deidara had lost interest in her shopping spree by the thirtieth minute and the two had
taken it upon themselves to start a rather rambunctious debate in the middle of the shopping centre. Sakura chose to ignore them and the attention they drew.

Sakura was too busy fingering through a selection of fuma shuriken when the overwhelming desire to eat took over her body. Her stomach growled as she groaned, realizing she hadn't eaten since the bowl of okayu she'd had for breakfast. Glancing down at her collection of bags, Sakura agreed that she had enough equipment and amended the fact she wouldn't be able to spend the fat stack of ryo in one day.

'I can, however, spend a bit more and get some food.' She quipped to herself as she ducked out of the store, leaving behind a morose looking shop keep who had been watching Sakura wave around her impressive bundle of cash all day.

"I'm done." It was enough to break the two long time partners out of their lovers spat, the two turning to face her. Sasori's face was still as calm and cool as ever, his glassy, auburn eyes seeming to spark when they settled on her face, his head tilting to the side. Deidara looked less composed, his face red and his hair in disarray from what looked like constant fussing with it.

"You've got everything, then?" Sasori asked and Sakura nodded, still just as uncomfortable under his gaze as ever.

"You kept us waiting for long enough." He responded to her nod dryly, obviously not impressed that it had taken her this long to complete all her tasks. Sakura was about to bite back with a stinging reply when her grumbling gut interrupted her. Sasori's eyebrow perked and Deidara scoffed.

"I'm fucking starving too, yeah." He spoke mostly to himself as he brushed past her, heading towards the exit. Sakura followed, carefully listening as Sasori fell in behind her. It was going to be hard to shake the feeling of anxiousness and nervousness around her new comrades, but Sakura had the feeling that that would be a good thing. If Hidan's reaction was anything to go by, she'd be a fool for letting her guard down around these men. She still didn't know why she'd been recruited, let alone what their plans were for her, so it'd be best if she stayed on her toes.

As they ducked out from under the eaves, Deidara was once again there with an open umbrella, except this time he did not wait for her, instead striding forward and into the mass of ame-nin and civilians. Sakura followed suit, driving herself through the mass and under the umbrella for some solace from the rain. Deidara didn't spare her a glance.

Glancing to her left, she spied Sasori falling into step beside her, his eyes connecting with hers, having been watching her longer than she had deemed it fit to watch him. Sakura's heart slid into her throat as an automatic desire to flee or fight overwhelmed her in that split second she'd made contact with those dark, auburn eyes. They have evoked dark memories of pain and fear from the time they had met on the battlefield, and it was difficult for her to remember that they were meeting as comrades now. Her legs locked and her hands fisted but she beat down the desire, forcing her eyes back in front of her to watch where she walked.

Between these two men, Sakura felt trapped.

But, she consoled herself with the thought that if they were to ever try anything, Sakura could simply blast her hand right through Sasori's face.

That seemed to do the trick.

It was a few minutes of navigating back streets and wandering past numerous streetside restaurants until they were out the premises of the place Deidara obviously desired to eat at tonight. Ducking
under the eaves Sakura was able to spot a sign that read 'Honda's Ramen Bar' before she quickly ushered herself in to the actual restaurant.

The overwhelmingly smell of numerous types of stock filtered through the air to blast Sakura right in the face with its savoury flavour, reminding Sakura of days long since passed. The small bar was already over capacity but it seemed that was not their destination as Deidara led them down the back to a small, four person booth that was empty. Far away from prying eyes and close enough to the kitchen to make a clean escape it needed.

*I don't think retreat is his strong suit.' Sakura thought to herself. Deidara gave off the aura of someone who would die young, too headstrong and egotistical to admit defeat.

Sliding into the opposite side of the booth from Deidara, Sakura immediately found herself boxed in as Sasori chose this opportunity to slide in beside her. Sakura realized her mistake far too late. Biting her tongue she pressed herself against the wall, attempting to leave as much space between her and Sasori as possible. Deidara seemed to find amusement in how uncomfortable his Master made her.

Faster than Sakura could read over the menu, they had a waitress at their table, pen poised over paper, ready to take their order.

"Tonkotsu ramen, yeah." Deidara quipped, not even looking at the menu in front of him. Sasori simply waved his hand, dismissing the woman's gaze; that left Sakura with the woman's attention. Quickly scanning the menu for something she knew she'd like, Sakura glanced back to the woman.

"Just a miso soup for me, please." Sakura gave a soft smile, showing more kindness to this one woman than she had her new comrades the entire day.

"Really, you're at the best ramen place in all of Amegakure and you're getting fucking miso soup, yeah?" The smile died on her lips as she turned to Deidara, giving him a dry look. Glancing back down at the menu, she brought her hand up, her finger tapping at another item on the plastic sheet.

"Tempura platter, please" Sakura's smile was even larger than before as she directed it towards their server for the evening. Deidara's eyes narrowed on her as Sasori glanced at her, amusement sparking in his normally dead eyes.

If Deidara was going to push her buttons, she'd push them right back. Her civility only extended so far.

The atmosphere as they waited for their meal to arrive was stilted, cold and silent, a stark difference to the one that enveloped the restaurant. Sakura's eyes remained everywhere else except on her companions, especially the one sitting directly beside her. Sasori didn't seem to have the same reservations, as his eyes had remained affixed to her the entire time. Sakura's jaw clenched as she entered the fifth minute of Sasori's intense staredown. At her wits end, her head whipped around, her eyes staring into his as her lips curled back in a snarl.

"What's your fucking prob-.." "Here we go!" The waitress interrupted with her chirpy demeanor, a clattering of bowls beings placed on the table. Biting her tongue, Sakura grabbed her own bowl of miso soup and her plate of tempura. Wasting no time she stuffed a wad of battered mitsuba into her mouth.

"Why did you accept?" It was a curiously asked question, coming from Sasori. Sakura paused briefly, wondering if it was a question worth answering or if she should simply tell him to go fuck himself. *He could probably do that.' Not that Sakura wanted to think about that in depth.
"Because I wanted to." It was a reply meant to brush him off, but Sakura doubted it would work. She flicked a piece of shrimp with her chopsticks before picking it up and jamming it in her mouth, using it as an excuse not to follow up with her answer.

"You were adamantly against it, yeah? Kisame and I thought you'd be dead after your meeting with Leader." Deidara put his two cents in, obviously curious on what made her change her mind. Sakura shifted uncomfortably in her chair, knowing if she told them why she'd most likely be blasted as a hypocrite or worse, be called naive.

"Kisame reckoned you'd rather choke kittens than join us, yeah." He wasn't necessarily wrong in that assessment, his certainly was the last place Sakura thought she'd end up. Her eyes focused on Deidara's bowl of ramen as the blonde haired man absentmindedly swirled it, the noodles collecting around the end of his chopsticks. The piece of Naruto lazily bobbed along in the middle, caught within the snare of noodles.

"He answered some questions I had. I have to admit, I had some misconceptions about the organization..." Her eyes lazily cut to Sasori, a glint of brilliant emerald easing out from under her thick lashes. "Not that you could blame me." Sasori returned the look, not saying anything; although the slight tilt of his lips gave it all away.

"But don't for one second think that I assume you're all here for some damn noble cause.' Sakura thought to herself, jamming a spoon full of miso into her mouth, her eyes dropping back down to her own food. 'Akatsuki is still an organization built on mass murderers and criminals. Leader is no doubt using them as the tools they are, and I'm sure they were "invited" just as I was.' Sakura would watch her back for now, knowing that at any possible time this whole thing could go belly up if any of them started to have a problem with her. She'd already had to fend off an attempt on her life today and she didn't expect it to be her last.

It seemed her answer had been accept, even if it was just for now and the rest of the evening went on without a hitch. They all made light conversation about nothing important, Sasori and Deidara being kind enough to give Sakura a lazy run down of Amegakure and its inner area's. Sakura didn't ask about any of the other members and neither of the two males offered up any information.

Once the meal was over, Sakura footed the bill before the three made their way back to the tower in silence, the soft patter of rain on the metal constructs that surrounded them their only companion. Sakura was slightly relieved to find the tower was situated in a quiet section of the village, away from the blaring music and happy drunken chatter.

Once again behind the protective seal that hid the door to enter the tower, Sakura parted ways from Sasori and Deidara, rebuffing Sasori's advances to walk her back to her room, assuring him she'd managed to memorise her way.

Once inside her room she spent the rest of her evening preparing, mixing antidotes and poisons, wearing in new kunai and carefully packing her new pouches. It was only once the night had crept into the wee hours that Sakura deemed herself ready for her first outing.

This would be her first step back into the ninja world, but this time, as an Akatsuki.
Man this chapter took a while for me to be able to finish off, I didn't know quite how to wrap it up. This chapter came off as a bit of a filler chapter, mostly filled with banter!

We also get a cheeky peek into Sakura's past, though Sasori cut it a bit short, oh no! ’v’
Planned Thoughts

Chapter Summary

Her light destroyed, Sakura now finds herself on a path she never thought she'd take, that of a missing-nin. Rumors of her status are spreading, and one organization has taken notice. Redemption is offered, will it be taken? Will the light of her life be replaced with a catastrophic boom?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Recap

Once inside her room she spent the rest of her evening preparing, mixing antidotes and poisons, wearing in new kunai and carefully packing her new pouches. It was only once the night had crept into the wee hours that Sakura deemed herself ready for her first outing.

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Free Thoughts

Chapter seven

Sakura woke to a soft, single tap on her door; her bleary eyes glanced out her small window to be met with darkness. It couldn't be any later than five am, meaning she'd had about five hours sleep.

'Ah, to be a ninja again.' She thought wistfully to herself, even though she had to admit to herself that five hours of uninterrupted sleep was somewhat of a luxury for someone in her line of work. Generally nights as a missing nin were punctuated by two hours of sleep at any one time, you constantly had to be on your feet and moving, aware of your surroundings wherever you lay.

Having taken her ten seconds to adjust to suddenly being awake, Sakura threw her feet off the bed, not having even bothered getting under the blankets last night. She swiped her tan pouches from the bedside cabinet and strapped them on; one around her thigh and two attached to her belt around her hips, sitting squarely above her arse. A small, oblong medic pouch was quickly fastened to the front of the belt, resting on the front of her other thigh. Striding towards the desk in her room that had been quickly scattered in bits and pieces, she grabbed her fully packed back-pack and swung it over a shoulder, her dull black cloak following as she quickly snapped it closed around her.

Sakura faltered in her stride towards the door, her foggy jade eyes catching on a small, useless item still sprawled along the centre of her desk. A soft glare being cast off its desiccated surface thanks to the lone desk light she had left on last night.

Her hand waivered as she reached for it, but she stealed her resolved and grabbed her slashed hitai-ate. Sakura had never quite accepted wearing the slashed protector, assuming it would finally seal her fate as a cast out.
'I suppose it's too late for that now.' Her place within the Akatsuki organization was far worse than anything she'd done previous, wearing her defaced hitai-ate would be nothing more than a splash in a pond in comparison.

She jammed it in her pants pocket and continued towards the door.

Opening the door softly she was met by Sasori, standing in the exact position he had greeted her in last night. A quick flick of her eyes assured her Deidara was also in his same position, leaning on the wall not too far down for her. All was quiet as she locked her door behind her, a small anti-tampering seal affixed over the keyhole to soothe Sakura's paranoia. It was identical to the ones covering her window.

Deidara scoffed.

Turning around she gave Sasori a nod, but he didn't seem to catch it in the low light of the blackened hallway and had simply turned around to begin his descent through the tower and out into the village. Sakura followed behind Deidara, the last in their little three man line. She was pleased, it would mean they wouldn't be able to see the uncertainty in her eyes.

'Even in the dark I'm sure they could pierce right through me.' Sasori's glassy eyes unnerved her, she wasn't sure where he was looking or just quite what he was thinking. Shinobi's eyes were often a gateway to their hidden thoughts, but Sasori's eyes were not his own, they were unnatural.

'Fucking doll eyes are creepy, this is why I couldn't stand that one okaa-san gave me.' Sakura did well in subduing her shiver of disgust as the creepy doll of years passed crept into her mind. She also remembered how it sat on her bookshelf until she had returned from the mission in which she had been stabbed by another little puppet boy and how it ended up in a trash can soon after.

After Sasori, Sakura didn't do dolls, not even the oddly perfect and uncannily attractive balljointed ones Ino had a tendency to gush over on their outings. They were too eerie.

Sakura was knocked from her thoughts as she found herself met by the morning chorus that resonated throughout all of Amegakure; rain. It seemed like she had made it through the dark, stretching corridors of the Akatsuki base on memory alone.

'My skills obviously aren't as dull as I thought they were.' And as to prove her otherwise, her body gave an alarming jolt as she found the traditional Akatsuki kasa dumped on her head. The bell rattled noisily as the thin strips of material swayed within the dark morning's breeze, but her hands quickly came up to secure it properly on her head.

She gazed out from behind the veil to see Deidara looking down at her, his one, visible eye piercing from under his own hat. He gave a single nod before he followed after Sasori, who also happened to have his own kasa, the soft chime of his bell giving away his position within the lamp lit street.

Unlike the previous day where they had to brazenly pushed through crowds and made their way about in broad daylight, this morning was filled with quiet stealth. Pipes and walls flew under their feet as they leapt from building to building, the landscape so much more different than any Sakura had transversed before. Konoha was all rooftops and trees where it seemed Ame was all smoking pipes, narrow alleyways between buildings, neon signs and billboard.

Before long they found themselves sliding out from within the boundaries of Amegakure through a suspiciously unguarded pipe that lead out onto the lake. It was then that Sakura could see the sun began to crest over the horizon, the rain clouds above doing nothing to stop the creeping rays
sneaking over the hilltops in the far distance. They raced towards them.

It was after a hour of racing through marshlands and through creeping treetops that they found themselves far enough away from Amegakure that the rain stopped. It seemed that this was the location for their departure as they came to a stop in a small, open clearing; Deidara's hands already stuffed within his bags to feast upon his prepared clay.

Sakura's face was red and she was panting softly as she glanced around nervously, they were far too close to the border of Fire Country for her not to be on edge. This was as close to her old stomping grounds as she had come since her estrangement, not daring to dance that thin line. There were too many border patrols, too much paranoia since Sasuke's reign had begun.

It didn't help that their plan entailed flying directly over a portion of the Fire country.

"Perhaps we should go up through the Kusagakure region." Sakura spoke for the first time that day, her hands clammy and wet as her heart rate began to peak. They were too close to old memories.

"No." It was a simple, flat response from Sasori and Sakura cut him a frosty glare. Even though there was no set leader for this three man team, Sakura could only guess they were expected to defer to Sasori, the longest serving member. She removed her hat, just as the other two had sought fit to do.

"That would add an entire day to the trip, yeah?" Deidara added his two cents, giving a bit more of a reason as to why Sakura's idea was bad. Sakura's frosty glare settled on him next, but unlike Sasori, Deidara met her gaze unflinchingly. Sakura knew she was being illogical and irrational, but she'd be damned if the idea of going anywhere near Konohagakure didn't set her on edge.

She had little time to come to terms with this, however, as in the next few seconds Deidara's hand spat out its creation; a fat little bird thing.

'Is oddly cute.' Sakura thought as she eyed the little dumpling before Deidara tossed it in the air, activating his prized jutsu with a simple hand gesture. There was a flurry of kicked up leaves and grass as it landed on the ground, the chubby, wobbly bird crouching low as if inviting the three onto its back.

"Not your greatest." The snide quip from Sasori ruffled Deidara's feathers as he lunged back.

"Well I quite like it." Sakura rolled her eyes and begun walking towards the bird, reaching out to rest a hand on the fat birds short, slightly curved beak. Deidara seemed to preen under the compliment, his fingers gliding through his golden locks as he shot Sasori a gloating look. Sasori's eyes narrowed, obviously displeased with the object of his fascination preferring Deidara's creations over his own.

"I think it's cute."

The clearing went still for all of about five seconds as Sakura's admission sunk in.

"Cute?!" Deidara nearly burst at the seams, his cheeks flushing red again as his anger boiled over. His art had been called many things throughout his life, devastating, frightening, loud, brilliant, mad, beautiful but never once had it been called cute. Sasori climbed onto the clay beasts back, once again happy that everything in the world seemed to be in right place once more; It seemed
Sakura didn't prefer Deidara's art over his own.

"It's not cute, it's art, yeah."

"It can be cute and art."

"No, no it can't be. My art is about being-"

"We cannot wait any longer we must depart now." It was a stern warning that both Deidara and Sakura took heed to, both knowing the ramifications of what would happen if they didn't cross Fire country at the correct, pre-planned times. Deidara grit his teeth, all three sets, before he clambered onto the bird. Once Sakura was situated on top, Deidara turned to face her.

"Small amount of chakra to hold on, okay? I have no idea what your medical jutsu bullshit will do to the clay in large amounts, let alone the natural composition of your own chakra. Last thing we need is the bird exploding mid air, yeah?" He raised his eyebrows as if to punctuation his odd vocal quirk and Sakura nodded in response.

"Worst comes to worst and we hit some turbulence, just fall off, yeah?" The smirk that accompanied his quasey insult was disconcerting, Sakura couldn't tell if he meant it as a joke or was a friendly jab.

"Sakura." The monotone voice was as constant as ever, going as far to give her the usual feeling of apprehension and revulsion. Casting her gaze to her right, she was greeted by the glassy auburn gaze of Sasori, who oddly enough was reaching a hand out to her.

"You may grasp me if you feel the need to." Sakura balked, nearly feeling her mouth drop open at such an offer coming from Sasori. This had been the man meaning to kill her and turn her into one of his puppets, and now, here he was, offering her some kind of reassurance.

‘What is going wrong with the world?’ It was a desperate, small voice that popped up in the quiet solitude of her own mind ‘Has everyone gone mad? Have I gone mad?’ Sakura could almost feel the desperate tears well up in her eyes, but they were quickly subdued as the bird leapt into the air with a beat of its wings, ascending into the sky.

‘Two weeks ago I thought I’d rather kill myself than be here. Five years ago I thought I’d live out my life with my friends and my teammates in a Village I loved and served and eventually settle down and have children. Now this?’ Sakura could feel her throat tighten at such a revelation, that her only friend seemed to be the man that had given her nightmares for years, had attempted to kill her -and nearly had- so that he could turn her into a puppet. It was nearly too much for Sakura's heart to take, and to be honest, she'd been about due for a nervous breakdown.

But as she looked up from the cold, grey of the clay beneath her hand any sense of manic depression seemed to erase itself from her mind, her throat clenching shut as the sight before her rendered her speechless.

The sky was alight with fire from the rising sun, the clouds normally so white and pristine were splashed with brazen hues of orange and reds. The sky was warm and golden along the horizon, the sun's rays creeping along the surface of the morning sky in its dark morning blue glory. The world stretched out before her, the gentle songs of waking birds just out of her reach as they soared higher into the atmosphere. Sakura had never been so high before in her life and she found herself and her problems oddly humbled by the view it brought.

The tree's so familiar to her reached into the sky as they breached the Fire county's territory, but they were so far below them she didn't feel that stinging fear enter her gut. The wind ripped
through her hair, stinging her eyes and rendering her voice useless if she was to speak, but Sakura couldn't bring herself to care, as the wind seemed to elevate her very spirit.

For the first time in a long time, Sakura felt light, her worries and problems seemingly lifted from her shoulders.

So caught up in the pure feeling of freedom she didn't even notice the lone eye gazing at her.

It was two hours later that Sakura gave the signal to begin descent; they'd successfully crossed through the small portion of Fire country that had barred their way to Otogakure. It was a slow but steady descent and it gave Sakura enough time to take out her map, quickly checking the surrounding area and locating their position. As they descended through the hillsides and into a small valley lined with rice paddies, Sakura felt an overwhelming relief to be back on the ground swell up through her. Although she had enjoyed the ride it had been a bit nerve wracking to know that if she fell off she'd be more or less fucked.

Wasting no time she slipped off the birds back like water off a duck, but quickly regretted her foolhardy endeavor as she stumbled and wretched. Her legs screamed in pain at the sudden movement, her muscles ablaze in agony as they were forced to stretch after being cramped up for two hours underneath her body. She quickly begun methodical stretching out her legs, knowing that they may have been spotted in their descent and may have to move fast if someone decided to come check them out.

She glanced over to see Deidara drop off his bird, not even a single falter in his step as he deactivated the bird, the little clay beast shrinking in size as it dropped into his hand, quickly swallowed up once more.

'I suppose he's had years to get used to it.' Sakura's jaded emerald eyes flicked to Sasori next only to find his creepy auburn gaze affixed to her. Well, locked upon her legs most noticeably. "He doesn't have any muscles to stretch." She bitched blandly to herself, refusing to think further on why Sasori was giving her legs the once over as she moved and stretched them.

"The eastern hideout should be that way." Sakura pointed towards the arid mountains seemingly devoid of life, a stark difference to the nature filled gorge they had landed in

"Then why didn't we land there, yeah?" Deidara cut her a dry look, not impressed with the possibility of trekking up the mountain's face if they simply could have flown opened her mouth to respond with something that should have been obvious to a shinobi of Deidara's caliber but Sasori interrupted her before she could even squeak.

"Just because the reports say there is no signs of life around the hideout doesn't mean there aren't." Deidara quipped back a soft 'That's exactly what it means.' under his breath but Sasori saw fit to ignore it. "Orochimaru is not the type to allow anyone to simply walk into his residence, even after he is dead."

Sasori's following look was directed more at Deidara than it was her and Sakura had to feel a little relieved, because the look he was casting the tallest male of the trio was dark and deep and spoke of past actions they had witnessed.

"There is a very strong possibility that what we might encounter aren't even human." Sakura felt the bile rise in her throat as the memories of previous encounters with both Oto nin and having descended into one of Orochimaru's "laboratory" before. The memories of the Otogakure main base left a foul taste in Sakura's mouth and reminded her why moral and ethic codes were mandatory for Medical nins.
‘If Naruto and I didn’t have Jiraiya with us...’ Sakura trailed off, her thoughts dissolving into curious speculation as to where Jiraiya was. In her three years of solitude she had not heard a single word as to where the pervy sage might have been, let alone what his fate was. He had not been within Konoha during Sasuke’s siege so had no doubt missed the first wave of brutal deaths.

‘Has he returned yet? did he hear what had happened? Did he go to try and stop Sasuke?’ These had all be questions she’d thought of before, but she had nothing to answer them with. Sakura decided this line of thought was getting her nowhere and instead settled for smacking her kasa back onto her head, stealing her resolve once more for the mission ahead. She cast a look to Sasori, who seemed to be observing her like usual, his steady, glass eyes waiting for her to make her first move.

‘It seems leadership has been given to me, oh joy.’ She thought bitterly, not pleased with having been put in charge of an explosive manic and a puppet boy.

Regardless of her hearts desire to be as far away from Sasori as possible, Sakura's brain knew it was for the best. Sasori no doubt knew more about Orochimaru than anyone that wasn't one of the Legendary Sannin, he was a knowledgeable person to have along for this mission.

That didn't mean that Sakura had to like it.

Giving a soft sigh, she glanced to Deidara to also see him watching her from beyond his ruffled veil, waiting for a signal or an order. Sakura gave it to him via a nod, and within a flash the three were gone, dispersed within the tree tops and heading towards the barren mountain tops.

It was a good feeling to stretch her legs once more, to run through the treetops with wild abandon, her cloak fluttering as she brushed through branches. Her eyes were focused steadily on the two males in front of her, taking the time to observe how the two moved. They seemed to ignore each other, not paying any heed to the other's proximity. It spoke of their trust of each other and also for the length the two had spent within each others company.

Sakura could remember fondly how she, Naruto, Sai and Kakashi-sensei could tumble over one another through the treetops without even sparing the others a glance. It was something they could never quite replicate with Sasuke back in his role making Team 7 whole again. He had been too paranoid, too untrusting and aware of his surroundings.

Before too long the terrain changed, the tree's morphing into short sided hills with rice paddies cut into their sides. Sakura's feet would land upon the surface with a soft ripple, but never falling below the exterior. They skimmed through the rice fields and continued on higher, nothing but soft black blurs if anyone was to spot them.

Her first step onto the side of the desolate mountain space was a shaky one, as the firm boulder beneath her foot wobbled, threatening to roll down the hill. Sasori and Deidara met similar fates, Deidara's feet sunk into the soft gravel below him and Sasori's rock gave way completely, turning into smaller clods of dirt and dust. It seemed they would not be leaping and bounding up the side of this mountain.

Taking a few moments to get her bearings, Sakura glanced around the landscape to spot a torii gate not to far away from them, marking the entrance to a road up the mountain side.

"Over there" Sakura motioned with her head towards the gate as she dropped from her boulder and onto the loose footing beneath.

"Is certain death." Sasori finished with a blasé tone "We should continue up this way. Going through the mountain pass would be like walking a lamb into the mouth of a lion."
Sakura was insulted Sasori didn't think she hadn't already thought of that. Biting back the snarky reply of 'No shit' she instead begun her venture over to the torii gate. Neither of the men followed her.

"We could just fly up, yeah?" Deidara quipped, hands already jammed into his clay pouches. As he looked up he was greeted with two very dry, stern looks. Deidara's shoulder deflated as his cheeks turned red, the spike in his anger clearly visible. Getting ready to fire back about both of their ideas were stupid he found himself cut off by Sakura.

"There are recent ox tracks coming from the mountain pass, if there are any traps they've been long since defused. We could at least use the path until we find ourself some steadier ground to ascend through." As she found herself on the flat, level ground of the dirt packed road she looked back up to her companions, happy that the kasa was shielding the sun from stinging her eyes.

"If there are any straggler nins or bandits, I don't think they'll bother us." Sakura intoned blandly as she gestured at her red cloud stained cloak, knowing that Akatsuki's reputation preceded them. It seemed to at least sway Deidara to her argument, as he dropped down beside her with an overly large jump. Turning away from Sasori, she continued her trek up the road, Deidara falling into step behind her.

It wasn't long until she heard Sasori quietly fall into step behind them.

'Flying is so much easier.' Sakura bitched to herself morosely as another bead of sweat made its way down from her hairline to drag across her face. She silently wished they could just jump on another of Deidara's birds and skirt to the top of the mountain range where the hideout existed.

They had nearly reached the plateau at the top, where the hideout was supposed to be located, and Sakura had been busy scouring the hill side looking for a discrete way up to the top. She was happy they hadn't been disturbed, not even a passing cart had made its way down the narrow path they trod.

'No bandits, no ninja, no problem."

"So, Sakura-chan," Deidara cast a slim glance at her, a flash of bright white teeth peaking out from the small gap within his parted veil. Sakura's eyebrow perked at the familiar suffix now attached to her name, it had been a very long time since someone had called her that. "Tell us about yourself, yeah?"

"No." It was a short reply as Sakura went back to looking for a way up the mountain that lead them towards their goal.

Deidara seemed to deflate a bit, a small pout on his lips.

"Do not bug her, Deidara." Sasori called back in his monotone voice, having been in front of the two for the majority of the trek. "I highly doubt she'd want to converse with someone like you."

Deidara sneered.

"I'd rather talk to him than you." Sakura bit back, a bit more venom in her voice than she had anticipated, but the comment had slipped out before she could bridle it. She'd been trying so hard to be civil.

Sasori simply glanced back at her, his own eyebrow raised in a mock gesture.
Deidara smirked.

"You here that Sasori-danna? Your precious Sakura would rather be talking to me." The way he said purred her name as a jab towards Sasori made Sakura want to shiver.

"Precious?" The word was almost vile on Sakura's lips; Deidara seemed amused at her revulsion. He threw an arm around her shoulder as he dragged her closer to him, her body pressing against his. The side of his torso was hard, yet pliable, but his body heat felt scorching against her flesh, it had been too long since Sakura felt the warmth of another living being so close to her.

Sakura bit back the desire to ram her fist through his ribcage.

Deidara's eyes were not on her as he continued his false show of affection, his lone denim orb affixed solely to those of his master as Sasori came to a dead stop in front of them.

"Sasori-danna talked about you a lot, Sakura-chan." It was only then that Deidara looked down at her, the steel bar that was his arm around her shoulders forcing her to continue walking until they were on par with Sasori.

'I don't like where this is going.' Was all Sakura could think as they came to a stop beside the shorter redhead with Sakura trapped right in the middle of the two. The air that hung around the trio was hot with searing emotions boiling off their skin, Deidara's gleeful, manic eyes were gazing over Sakura's head to focus on Sasori while the dead, auburn eyes looked back.

Sakura's patience was dead thin at this point in the stand still, her fists clenching as her mind raced over who she should punch first. 'If I go for Sasori, I can get him off and over the cliff, but Deidara is a more volatile target, if he gets to far away he could bomb the entire mountain side.'

The doton jutsu that erupted from the ground in front of her made that choice easy, however.

The giant dragon that formed out of the earth before them rocketed towards the trio, Sakura thrust herself towards the oncoming danger as Sasori and Deidara fell back.

'The difference between close range and long.' Was the last lucid thought that flickered through Sakura's mind before she switched to instinctive combat mode.

She leapt high as the dragon lunged forward towards her, easily escaping the attack before she contorted her body into a flip, bringing her blazing foot down upon the dragons head. With a swift crack and a boom the once mighty looking dragon was reduced to rubble beneath her feet.

Wasting no time to wait for her comrades to join the fray, she kept her forward momentum going, the kunai in hand leading the way further down the mountain pass. It was handy to help deflect the the shuriken and kunai that seemed to erupt from the ground below her, aiming themselves at her face and neck.

"Don't give me that shit!" Sakura barked, all too familiar with the technique being used. Rearing her hand back she pumped into it the correct amount of chakra for her maneuver before she slammed her fist into the ground, causing three large cracks to race out from the impact point.

Sakura's kunai flew true as it sunk into the forehead of her hidden opponent, having been exposed by her devastating, ground breaking attack. Sakura sneered as her eyes came to rest on the symbol adorning the shinobi's vest, the musical note telling her that Otogakure was still alive and kicking.

She was moving before the three shuriken reached her, but she needn't have bothered, as they were easily deflected by the towering puppet that took her place. The resounding explosion that came from across the gully assured her that whoever had sent them no longer lived to try it again.
Sakura glanced at the puppet before her fiery emerald eyes danced down the chakra strings to the man they were attached to, a silent message conveyed between the two.

This just got a lot more dangerous.

"He just gave away our fucking position." Sakura barked as she stormed back up to Sasori to snatch her kasa from his free hand, not having realized it had slipped off in the middle of this short scuffle.

"It's what he does." Sasori blandly replied, pulling back his puppet to store within. Sakura couldn't help but shoot a short look at the human puppet that loomed beside her.

'It looks oddly familiar.' The short, messy black hair and black triangular markings on each of the puppets cheeks pulled at an old memory, but it wasn't quite one Sakura could remember. The puppet was massive in stature, and definitely male.

The fact that Sakura damn well knew how Sasori made his puppets made her visibly uncomfortable.

"He's not a friend of yours." Sakura's head snapped back to Sasori as he sealed the puppet away, tucking the scroll back under his cloak. Sasori didn't explain further.

"That was the last of them." Deidara called out as he fell from his birds back, the creature dispersing in a cloud of smoke. Deidara's kasa was nowhere to be seen, obviously lost of the wind.

"Did you see that explosion?" Deidara aimed the question at Sakura, his lone eye manic with glee, obviously pleased to be showing off his art.

"No, but I'm sure everyone else in the area did." She seethed, but Deidara didn't take her comment badly, instead it seemed to make him even happier.

"That's not a good thing!" Her voice was almost shrill as suppressed the desire to deck Deidara in his stupid smug face to make that fading bruise even bigger.

"Don't bother, he's too dense to realize that his art a farce." Sasori bitterly intoned, beginning to walk through Sakura's devastation to continue his hike to the hideout, or at least a sheltered area where they could make camp for the night.

That seemed to do wonders in wiping the smirk of Deidara's face.

"Hey! What the fuck do you know about art, yeah?!"

Sakura's sighed before she begun to follow once more.

Chapter End Notes

Notes

The first jutsu used was Doton: Dosekiryu otherwise known as Earth Style: Earth Dragon. The second jutsu used by the oto nin to hide underground was Doton: Moguragakure no Jutsu, or Earth Style: Hidden Mole Jutsu, a jutsu that was
frequently used by Kakashi.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Her light destroyed, Sakura now finds herself on a path she never thought she'd take, that of a missing-nin. Rumors of her status are spreading, and one organization has taken notice. Redemption is offered, will it be taken? Will the light of her life be replaced with a catastrophic boom?

Chapter Notes

I WAS AN IDIOT AND ACCIDENTALLY FORGOT TO UPLOAD CHAPTER 7 WOOPS. I uploaded chapter 8 AS 7, but it's now been corrected.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Recap

"Did you see that explosion?" Deidara aimed the question at Sakura, his lone eye manic with glee, obviously pleased to be showing off his art.

"No, but I'm sure everyone else in the area did." She seethed, but Deidara didn't take her comment badly, instead it seemed to make him even happier.

"That's not a good thing!" Her voice was almost shrill as suppressed the desire to deck Deidara in his stupid smug face to make that fading bruise even bigger.

"Don't bother, he's too dense to realize that his art a farce." Sasori bitterly intoned, beginning to walk through Sakura's devastation to continue his hike to the hideout, or at least a sheltered area where they could make camp for the night.

That seemed to do wonders in wiping the smirk of Deidara's face.

"Hey! What the fuck do you know about art, yeah?!"

Sakura's sighed before she begun to follow once more.

Planned Thoughts

Chapter eight

It had been a cold, sleepless night in the small, secluded cave they had decided to call camp for the previous night. Sakura had been awake for most of it, not quite trusting her vulnerable, sleeping body to the care of her brand new teammates, though her distrust didn't seem to phase them whatsoever. Deidara had slept like a rock and even Sasori had taken a few hours worth of rest, it seemed even the eternal boy needed some shut eye every now and again.
'One would think the lack of human body would mean lack of exhaustion.' Her eyes cut through the darkness of the still morning to catch sight of those fiery red locks. 'But then again, maybe it's habit.'

Or maybe weakness. Sakura would think more on it later.

It had been under Sasori duress that they leave before the sun crested the mountain top, and Sakura had readily agreed, keen to be on her way once more. Sitting around with these two had made her antsy and uncomfortable, and the way Deidara seemed to smirk and wander closer to her at any given opportunity let her know they knew that. Deidara was obviously the type of person to take advantage of that and try to get under her skin; Sakura hated those kinds of people.

It made her notice them more.

Sakura grit her teeth as Deidara wandered closer to her again, trapping her between himself and the rocky surface of the mountain, he didn't even glance at her but Sakura knew enough about him to know there would be an insufferable smirk under that veiled kasa Sasori had graciously given to him. She simply stopped walking, the swift break from formation giving her enough of a gap to stride over to the other side of the trail to peer over the edge, looking down the wide gulley.

Even in the darkness she could make out the slow, docile current of the ample river below, knowing its depth had probably taken more lives than her. As her companions stopped, her eyes closed, this short respite from walking less of an opportunity for sightseeing and more one for listening. She stilled her breath, using the stillness of the morning to listen for any kind of movement; the ravine would amplify any unusual sounds and guide them straight to her.

Looking over her shoulder to see her two cloaked companion, shaking her head in a negative motion, least she give away their position to someone doing the same thing. They moved on, this time, Sakura sticking to the edge of the path that left her with an easy means of escape, the river.

It had been a couple hours later, the sun had risen and Sakura realized they had begun moving away from their objective, the narrow mountain pass taking them further down into the valley than they had wanted. While their original objective had been to follow the path until they found a more suitable area to ascend from, it seemed their plan would have to deviate once more. With a huff, she jammed the map back into a pocket that lined the inside of her cloak, her annoyed eyes fixing on those of her companions.

"Well, it's not like they don't already know we're here." Sakura bitched, rolling her eyes.

Deidara's grin resembled that of a cat that had eaten the canary.

"We fly then, yeah?"

"No." Sasori cut in this time, his auburn eyes slipping from her -because they were always watching her- to Deidara. "Just because they know someone is here doesn't mean we want them to see us coming or know that it is us."

Sasori's eyes cut back to Sakura "Do you know of any Genjutsu that can hide the users presence?"

"Like Kakuremino no jutsu? or Meisaigakure no jutsu?" Sakura thought back on her run in with Tsuki no Kuni kunoichi from her genin days that had inspired her to learn it, not that Sakura was any good at it.
"No, Kakuremino no jutsu wouldn't work while moving and Meisaigakure no jutsu can only be cast on the user. A Genjutsu may be more reliable."

"I couldn't cast one on such a large area." Sakura countered, not quite sure what Sasori was getting at.

"What about on a smaller area around you?" Sakura's eyes narrowed and her eyebrows pinched, her mind racing over the implication Sasori stated.

"You're asking if it's possible that I cast a genjutsu shield over myself and a smaller area so no one can see me?" Sasori nodded, Sakura's brow furrowed further as her mind ran through multiple jutsu's she knew and if they could be moulded into what Saso was asking for.

'It could be possible. It would simply require moulding the chakra within the genjutsu to distort the area around the subject, similar to how a mirage distorts light. It could cause anyone looking into the genjutsu to receive a distorted image.' Sakura's mind raced through brief hand signals and ways in which she might have to develop and mould her chakra to make such a thing possible. Genjutsu had been what she was to master in if Tsunade hadn't accepted her as an apprentice.

However Sakura wasn't a prodigy like Kakashi, she couldn't create a jutsu on the spot. Not that she'd ever let that stop her before.

"It's possible" She stared back into Saso's auburn eyes, a look of determination set in her features. "but it won't be perfect. I haven't learnt a genjutsu like it before, I don't even know if one exists. It would be a modification on one I already know but I have no idea how long I can hold it for or how big an area it will cover, I won't even be able to move while casting it."

At this point in time Sakura expected Sasori to rub his mask covered chin, crinkle his one eye in a cheery way and tell her his smarter, better plan that made use of his genius intelligence, several of his handy-dandy jutsu's and several of Deidara's Kage Bunshin. Then Deidara could cry out in excitement 'Wow Sasori-sensei, I never would have thought of that, Dattebayo!' and bound away to defeat an incredibly powerful enemy without breaking a sweat and needing no help from her, like usual.

"Good." Sasori said with a nod. "Would you like to attempt it now?"

Sakura balked, nearly taking a step back in shock as Sasori took her proposal seriously.

"U-uh, sure?" Sakura replied in an unsure voice, her eyes flicking back between Sasori and Deidara nervously while both of them watched her intently. Her nervous eyes dropped to her hands as she began to slowly form the hand signs she would need to mould the genjutsu into the mirage like illusion, it was a dry run with no chakra involved, simply meant to help her get used to the process and the new set of signs.

Confident in her dry runs, Sakura looked up to Deidara and Sasori again, the duo still watching her closely. Her shielded eyes lingered on Deidara, the tall blonde seemingly offput by the whole ordeal, Sakura resolved to ask him about it later under the pretense of building bounds of comradeship or something.

"If all goes well it should resemble a rock wall, or at least something rock coloured." Sakura ceased her nervous fidgeting as she steeled herself. A flurry of hand seals followed, a series of twelve in total all formed with innate accuracy and with speed that her late sensei would have been proud of. The flow of chakra was precise, weaved into a genjutsu with nothing more than Sakura's exceptional control. The series of seals ended with the horse seal as Sakura locked her hands in place, her fingers entwined within the horse seal and keeping it there.
Sakura’s eyes remained closed as she concentrated on stabilizing the genjutsu around her, feeling it waiver and bend. From what she could tell on feeling alone was that there was a thin barrier of chakra in front of her, hopefully broadcasting the illusion for her companions to see. It was roughly forty seconds before she dropped her arms, pleased with having stabilized the genjutsu as well as she had for her first casting of a bastardized genjutsu.

"How did it look?” It was with an odd sense of hope that she looked to Sasori and Deidara.

"Could be better, but it’ll do, yeah.” Sasori simply nodded in agreement with Deidara and Sakura felt her shoulders deflate, but she grit her teeth and pushed her question again.

"But how did it look?"

"Fuzzy grey wall, only worked from frontal view, could still kinda see your hair, yeah. Pink’s not a good choice for our line or work.” Deidara grinned from beyond his kasa but Sakura met it with one of her own. While they may not have been impressed, Sakura certainly was; she simply hadn't expected to pull it off at all.

"How long can you hold it for?” Sasori asked

"Without complete chakra depletion? Ten minutes, anything beyond that would leave me unable to fight at my best, twenty five before I become unconscious.”

"It will work, it should cover you and Deidara as you ascend.” Sakura's grin was wiped from her face as her now hard eyes fixed themselves on Sasori, although the sound of something soft hitting the ground pulled her eyes back Deidara's way, to see an old friend curled up on the ground. Sakura did well in subduing her shiver of disgust as the long centipede unraveled itself and begun scurrying towards the mountain side. With his usual hand seal, Deidara enlarged his creations, though it was noticeably smaller this time around and its legs were far longer.

Before Sakura could think to question either of her companions, she found Deidara's firm forearm encircling her under her breasts and holding her rigidly against his equally hard body. She could feel his taut, muscular side of his body press into the soft curve of her back, his heat radiating through the layers of cloak to penetrate her. With anyone else from her previous team this may have made her slightly flustered, hell, if she'd read it in any romance novel she may have even found it incredibly romantic.

Sadly, it was nothing but uncomfortable and would leave her ribs painful for a couple of hours.

Looking up at Deidara, her kasa knocked his, adjusting it just enough that she was able to gaze into his lone blue eye, the very same eye that gazed back into hers. He gave her a wink as a large, oddly friendly yet endearingly roguish smile caught his supple, plump lips.

Once again, very romantic if not for the fact he had tried to kill her teammates.

"Ten minutes, Deidara, no less.” Sasori's voice dragged her attention back to him, and as she watched the puppet boy bring his right arm up to face the mountain side she saw the very same hand flip back to rest against his wooden forearm. From the hole now exposed a large cable dislodge itself, propelled with a burst of smoke and launched somewhere high into the mountain side.

"Do not keep me waiting.” Was the last words he spared them before the cable began retracting with a snap, launching Sasori up the mountainside. Unable to see where he landed, Sakura turned her attention back to Deidara, her body suddenly tense as she was left alone for the very first time with an Akatsuki member.
"Cast it, yeah." Deidara quipped at her, his own eyes focused on the sheer mountainside above them as his hand gripped into the centipede's back. Sakura nodded stiffly, her hands forming the series of seal with some degree of familiarity, her eyes closing once more in concentration. As the genjutsu cast, Sakura felt herself heaved upwards sharply, the painful ascension as the centipede lurched up hill with surprising speed leaving her out of breath and nearly winded.

She did not let it break her concentration.

It was not a clean, silent ascension, it was filled with plumes of dirt, flicking stones and small cascades of rocks and pebbles in their wake, but it was a much faster climb than if they had simply made it themselves. Sakura simply hoped her genjutsu would deflect any attention and anyone witness to their ascent simply chalked it up to normal mountain activity.

She was equal parts surprised and relieved when they made it to the crest within the time limit, knowing if they had walked it would have taken them hours, if not the rest of the day. It seemed Deidara's creatures had a knack for swiftness. She'd have to remember that.

"We're here." Deidara's voice was soft and light, gently whispered into Sakura's ear and it was through that Sakura knew to keep just as quiet. Releasing the genjutsu, she broke from Deidara's embrace and rolled onto her feet, keeping crouched down to the ground. It took her a few seconds to get her bearings, taking in the area around her. It seemed they were at the cusp of mountain where Orochimaru's eastern hideout laid, hidden within a small crop of rocks, although they were far too high to be spotted from the mountain pass below.

The mountain they resided on stood higher than the one opposite from it, allowing a clean, full view out over the land of Otogakure, over the gorgeous landscape dotted with glittering lakes and rice fields, dark forest covered hills, soft and round in shape with the ocean spread out far beyond. It did little to hold Sakura's attention as she turned to her companions, far too focused on the mission at hand to care.

Within the short few moment Sakura was cataloging her surroundings, Deidara's centipede had dissipated and was no more and both of her teammates were currently peaking over the edge of the mountain, deep into the chasm that lay within the mountains centre. This mountain had no peak, instead the once active volcano had an enormous crater and deep within this crater Sakura could see their destination, Orochimaru's eastern hideout.

The hideout itself was no great feat of architecture, in fact, all it seemed to be was a giant stone ring with a large, deep, circular shaft in the middle.

'Looks are deceiving.' Sakura could hazard a guess that the hideout was located beneath the surface, descending deep into the mountain. However it was not the hideout itself that kept Sakura's attention, it was the large gathering of otō nin scurrying around that did. It seemed they had set up a base camp of sorts with large wooden constructions built at the side of the hideout, there to help drop platforms deep within the centre column.

"About eighty shinobi in total, including any other personal, yeah." Deidara softly spoke, a soft whir and click following his words as his scope zoomed in further. Deidara was covered in a thick layer of dirt, even going as far as to coat his generally well kept thatch of blonde hair, Sakura assumed she looked just as bad.

"Entrance to the plateau at your six." Sakura added her own input, having just spotted the small, hidden entrance that no doubt lead to a hidden path down the mountain, one she was now glad they had not found.
"How do you want to proceed?" She turned to the duo beside her, but was met by an unsettling grin from Deidara, his hand already shoved in his clay pouch.

"How we always do, Sakura-chan." And before Sakura could interject, before she could offer to cause a cascade and take out the lower quadrant of tents and nin, or even formulate a plant, Deidara was gone. Over the edge of the crater he leapt, a large bird catching his short fall.

"Sasori!" Sakura hissed under her breath as she turned on him, expecting him to be held liable for Deidara's actions, but it was too late as behind Sakura erupted a cascade of explosions. Turning around she was met with destruction, for while she had missed the climax of Deidara's art, she bore full witness to its aftermath. The plateau was alight with fire and death and what remained of the camp or constructions was little more than kindling. From her location she could barely make our human figures, but she could hear screaming, screaming so loud and pained it bellowed up with the smoke and dissipated into the ether, save for the scant few that haunted her ears.

Before she could even think she was gone, leaping over the edge and racing down the near sheer crater wall, her footing as loose and uneven as the shingles and rocks she stepped on. Her overwhelming drive to heal and save pushing her further down, though it was the hand upon grasping her collar that stopped her hasty descent.

"If you go down now you will die." Sakura's heart slowed as she regained control of her senses, falling onto her arse as she was brought back onto a small ledge formed by jutting rocks. Her eyes remained focused on the sight before her, intent on watching and waiting like a good shinobi does. It was certainly not the worst thing she had seen in her years of a shinobi; death was the norm, she had dealt it and had in some way received it. She would certainly not preach herself a saint or fight for those below, fight for a more merciful death be dealt to them, because no one would ever do it for her.

She would wait until the all clear was given, she would descend, comb through the debris and kill any that survived. She had done it before and she would do it again, because she was a shinobi and this is what it meant.

But the call of 'all clear' was not given, instead a loud, manic cry tore through the sky.

"Art is an explosion!"

While Sakura had not seen first hand the climactic explosion Deidara could bring, she watched on this time as Deidara once more brought about the utter pinnacle of his artwork with one final detonation.

The sheer force of the shockwave rendered Sakura unable to breath as she felt the heat sear her lungs, her vision was almost completely shrouded in all consuming white as she felt her eyes burn with the blinding heat that washed over her. Her skin ached as the waves of heat washed over her, forceful enough to knock her kasa flying off, not that she could bring herself to care in this sparse, fleeting moment of being so close to something all consuming that she should have been devoured by the explosive fire.

But just like that it was gone, leaving nothing more in its wake than ringing ears, fried skin and sore eyes.

Sakura remembered to breathe.

She gazed down, rubbing one of her eyes with the heel of her palm as she viewed what remained of the crater. 'Not much.' Was the thought that trickled through her scattered brain. What remained once was now gone, any large chunks of debris that had lasted the first explosions did not last the
second, final one. Where the heart of the camp once remained was now another large crater, its outside decorated with scant bits of remains, be it human or otherwise. Anything else that survived the explosion had either been forcibly expelled from the crater or now lined the wall of it.

Sakura’s eyes briefly flicked to the side of the plateau to see what had become of the secret entrance, only to find it completely blocked by rocks and boulders that had become dislodged.

‘I assume we’re flying out of here.’ She nodded to herself, her face expressionless before she began her controlled descent into the crater, no hand wrapped in her collar to stop her this time.

it wasn’t till she was halfway down the crater side that she realized she may be in shock, but by the time she had reached the bottom she had successfully expelled that notion. She wandered through debris, Sasori slowly following her from behind, a bit more wary than her. Her eyes flicked around the plateau she now stood on, looking for any kind of information before they came to settle on the blonde bomber who was casually reclining on his creation in the centre of the clearing.

Sakura fist clenched as she pushed down the desire to deck Deidara for such reckless abandonment and for his complete disregard for his teammates. Deidara seemed to pick up on her agitation as she stalked even closer to him, his eyebrow perked as he looked down at her.

"Don't tell me you're going to start bitching and crying about how we could have solved this peacefully, yeah." Sakura took a deep breath in. "You Konoha nin are all the same, too overly emotional."

Sakura was fully aware that Deidara liked to push buttons, she had come to expect it in the short amount of time she knew him, she just didn't expect herself to take the bait so readily. So when she threw a punch, she was surprised to find her fist once more destined to bury itself into the side of Deidara's face.

She found herself stopped short as a set of chakra threads latched onto her skin, but the force of the dispelling chakra rushing out from her fist was enough to send a rush of air over Deidara's face, knocking his dirt covered locks out of his view. Deidara faltered, taking a step back, but it was enough of a win for Sakura.

"I'd appreciate if you didn-'" Sakura did not listen to Sasori's reproach, instead she was intent to advance on Deidara, her body and face held in such a way to try and intimidate the taller man. Her face was foul and her eyes were bright with anger and her own sense of disapproval, her shoulders hunched as if she was attempting to loom over the taller male. Sakura had experience in intimidating men twice her size, Deidara's height wouldn't save him from this.

"In Konoha" Sakura spat the name of her once homeland in his face "we knew what the fuck team work meant. We didn't bound off to destroy an entire encampment without running it past our teammates." Sakura barked, her voice rising in agitation with every word. Deidara's eyebrows pinched as he looked down at her, obviously confused that this was the part she was upset about, not that he had taken lives and hurt her "feminine feelings of morals and ethics and precious human life." Sakura resolved to beat the sexism and prejudice out of him later.

"What if the ring was here?" She barked once more, her ire rising as she tried to advance on him, but found herself restrained by the strings connected to her arm, she shot a scathing look back at Sasori but was met with dead auburn eyes. "It's pretty fucking obvious they were retrieving Orochimaru's old work, his scrolls and artifacts! What if you've just destroyed the fucking ring?!" Sakura took a deep breath, trying to calm herself, knowing that her yelling would get them nowhere in the end. Deidara would no doubt dig his heels in and claim he was right in his actions and Sasori would view her as a child having a tantrum.
"I don't know how you two work." She took a pause to look at both of them "I don't know your team dynamics, but this" Sakura pointed a stiff finger down at the crater "is not how I work in a team." Deidara seemed to shift uncomfortably, Sasori remained as still and eternal as ever.

"You two have several years of working together under your belt, but until last week, we were archenemies. So it might be nice if you throw me a fucking bone every now and again, yeah?" And with that, Sakura severed the chakra threads with a single swipe of a chakra scalpel, she then turned and began to walk towards what remained of the hideout, intent to see if anyone was left. Before she could make it a couple of feet away she found herself glued to the spot as what Sasori said next shocked her into stillness.

"I apologize, Sakura-chan. We will attempt to work as a more...cohesive unit in the future." Sakura didn't turn around, instead she kept her back towards the duo. She missed the look Sasori shot at his long time companion, making the taller man squirm.

"Sorry, Sakura-chan, yeah." Sakura simply nodded, pleased to see that his master had worked some kind of civility and politeness into the rowdy, wild blonde. Casting a glance back over her shoulder, she nodded her head towards the hideout, asking them to follow her, they complied readily, falling into step beside her.

The section of the hideout that lay upon the surface of the crater was partially demolished, the side that faced inwards had taken the brunt of Deidara's explosive force, having had large sections of the rock wall dislodged and thrown down the gaping hole in its centre.

Briskly climbing over the crumbled section, Sakura peered down into the chasm, her eyes searching for movement and her ears straining for noise. While she didn't see or hear anything, she knew the chance of there being shinobi below was highly likely, and even worse was the fact they would no doubt be the smartest and strongest this outcropping of Oto nin had to offer. They'd have to be if they wanted to survive the traps and other things that lurked below.

'First thing on the list, however, is how to get down there.' Sakura's eyebrows pinched in thought before she threw Deidara a look.

"Can't fly down, yeah. We'd be like fish in a barrel. On top of that, no room for maneuvers." He had a point there. "Our best bet would be scaling the inside, it looks like a flat surface till at least one hundred meters in."

The depth of the shaft was at least two hundred meters deep if the glowing flare at the bottom was anything to judge by, so the other hundred would no doubt be railings for the bases levels.

"We would be better off starting at the lowest level and working our way up." Sasori pitched in "The Oto nin would have started at the highest. If there are any remaining they are no doubt making their way up." He pointed to the last remaining platform the otogakure shinobi had built, the sad looking structure jutting out from the highest level a hundred meters down.

Sakura gave a nod, silently hoping Orochimaru's last resting place resided at the bottom of this dead, dark pit. Sakura wouldn't be pleased if they had to clear out the entire hideout to try and find the cursed ring. With a soft huff she ruffled her own hair, a soft plume of dirt surrounding her as it dislodged from the agitation. This reminded her to take a brief second and brush off the dirt that clung to her cloak.

'No reason to be a pig, regardless of the situation.' It didn't do much, and she was still just as dirty as before, it would take a good scrub to get rid of this level of filth.
"If we find this ring before nightfall, how about we stop at the river before we head back? I saw this great little inlet that would make a great bath." Sakura chirped, offering the trio an incentive to smash through this mission as soon as possible. It had usually worked on Naruto whose enthusiasm would triple, with Kakashi occasionally taking the bait if it was something extra juicy.

It seemed to do the trick for Deidara at least, as he gave his hair a disgusted flick, intent on keeping the soiled locks out of his face. Sasori seemed non-plussed either way. Giving a reassuring nod to herself, Sakura stepped over the edge, her foot sticking to the surface of the shaft like a pink haired gecko. She wasted no time to check her her teammates followed and instead begun a hasty descent, her arms streaming behind her as she dashed down the rift.

The flurry of shuriken as she descended past the flat wall and onto the post of the first level was expected; they were all easily deflected with a kunai but before she could return her own collection of shuriken a colony of small white, spherical bats erupted from her companion, homing in on the perpetrator in a were detonated immediately with a soft utterance of 'Katsu' leaving no time to scream. The explosion resonated through the empty shaft they descended through, no doubt stretching through the complex to alert anyone else within the vicinity.

The run continued without incident, which left Sakura slightly relieved. The explosion let others know enemies were within the compound and any shinobi smarter than they were powerful would know to keep far, far away unless they wanted an explosive altercation. It meant they wouldn't meet any battle hungry, overly powerful shinobi out to prove their worth through unrepentant killing. They would have come running at the sound of a fight.

Sakura kicked a small rock out of her way as she looked around, her and her companions surrounded in nothing but darkness, the flare since handed out, as they stood at the bottom of the shaft. It seemed no light dared reach down this far. She sighed, her eyes not picking up much in the still black. It would be a risky move to light anything, but it would be their only way of moving around; ninja may have excelled in the cover of night, but only a scant few could work in complete darkness like this.

"It seems these fools can't even activate such a simple seal." Sasori hissed under his breath, obviously not impressed with such incompetence. It only took a few seconds and a soft flare of chakra before light began emanating from behind her. Turning, Sakura was brought face to face with a towering serpent, larger than any she had seen before. Sasori had his hand placed upon the snakes muzzle, a small seal glowing from beneath, activating whatever jutsu Sasori had been bitching about.

The light source was located within the Snakes eyes, two small candles obviously activated via whatever Sasori was doing, and it seemed to be spreading. Small candles seemed to ignite around the base, the seal no doubt spiraling throughout the shaft as light began to emanate from each level. Sakura felt a bit better about not having to trudge through the dark, but on the other hand she knew it would be the same for the oto nin they currently had as company.

"So, where should be start, Sasori-danna?" Deidara quired, a soft chirp in his voice.

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Do you have an Otogakure shinobi OC you'd like to see incorporated into the next chapter? If so, hit my up via Private Message with a description of your OC!

You will of course get a shout out in the chapter it's used in!

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Chapter End Notes
Notes:

Kakuremino no jutsu = Cloak of Invisibility Technique or Disguise Jutsu, pretty basic technique even academy kids know.

Meisaigakure no jutsu = Hiding with Camouflage Technique or Chameleon Jutsu. It seems to be a very hard technique to use.

The genjutsu Sakura created is a made up one, as I was unable to find one that suited my needs. It has no name. I didn't really want to have Sakura to pull off an amazing genjutsu she just made up, as they take years to create and develop, so hers is more like a bastardization of one she already knew. Sakura certainly has the skill and intellect to develop her own genjutsu, so I put her innate skill, control and intelligence to work. I hope it came across well and not like some kind of Mary-sue ability!

I try to keep all jutsu's used in this story as canon as possible, but there will be times I make some up. I'll try to keep them canon and not overpowered! I'll certainly tell you if they're made up or not in the notes!

A/N: Sakura is pretty unused to having people take her as a serious comrade who can handle her own and can bring something beneficial to the party, as she was generally outclassed by her teammates. Seeing as how she's on a team with people she can match in terms of shinobi ability, I like to think she'll be taken more seriously and have more input. She will be an integral part to this trio! Sasori already knows how smart, powerful and dangerous she can be, she did nearly kill him (in this universe.) He already see's her as someone on par with him, so has some kind of respect for her. Especially since she developed an antidote for his poison, which he didn't think anyone could.

Deidara has to learn this still, not having had a serious one on one fight with her. As you can tell by his comments in the story, he certainly has some prejudice and sexist opinions of her. I'm sure they'll change ;)

I always get super annoyed when I see people writing Sakura like she won't kill and hates to do it and won't do it, even going so far as to stop others from killing her enemies. Like come on she's a damn ninja, she doesn't exactly have to like it but she has to do it, it's literally their job 80% of the time. It's even MORE annoying when the author uses the fact that she is the "empathetic female" to stop her from killing.

My rendition of Sakura will dislike killing, but still do it easily. She's aware that it's their job and an inevitability, but can easily rationalize it. Especially if it's people she can pigeon hole as 'evil.'

I like to think that Sasori is the cultured, civil and polite one in the DeixSaso duo and Deidara is the young, out of control one who had to taught how to act like he wasn't raised by wolves. It seems to be a common sentiment, but I love it x)
Decomposing Thoughts

Chapter Summary

Her light destroyed, Sakura now finds herself on a path she never thought she'd take, that of a missing-nin. Rumors of her status are spreading, and one organization has taken notice. Redemption is offered, will it be taken? Will the light of her life be replaced with a catastrophic boom?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

WARNING

CHAPTER CONTAINS DESCRIPTION OF DEAD BODIES AND CASUAL NUDITY.

Recap

The light source was located within the Snakes eyes, two small candles obviously activated via whatever Sasori was doing, and it seemed to be spreading. Small candles seemed to ignite around the base, the seal no doubt spiraling throughout the shaft as light began to emanate from each level. Sakura felt a bit better about not having to trudge through the dark, but on the other hand she knew it would be the same for the oto nin they currently had as company.

"So, where should be start, Sasori-danna?" Deidara quired, a soft chirp in his voice.

Decomposing Thoughts

Chapter nine

The lower levels of the hideout reeked with wet decay, moss and lichen which was clinging to the rough surface of the walls. Sakura's feet left a wet squelch after every step, the material at the bottom of her feet waterlogged as she led the way down the narrow hallway.

'Really need new shoes.' Was the soft whisper that was hardly heard within her mind. She took a hard right, carrying down another equally dark, moist hall, her eyes flickering over the wooden doors, small kanji dug into their faces. They all read as different things, but all equally as useless to Sakura. A med bay here, a private quarters there, and more research and science bays than she cared to see, they hadn't entered any of them.

'Sasori said to look for anything unusual, Orochimaru wouldn't mark his quarters outright. They'll either be completely unmarked or disguised in a way.' A turn down another hallway, Deidara and Sasori following behind as she led. 'It seems even here he didn't trust his subordinates. What a life that must be.' Sakura didn't feel pity for the man, but she could empathize to a certain degree, for Sakura knew she had been trapped in the same fate, a lifetime of paranoia and mistrust. The fate she had resigned herself to the moment she threw off her hitai-ate and abandoned her comrades. Her friends.
Sakura stopped as the hallway changed texture under her feet. The once harsh, rough surface of carved, unpolished stone became smooth and worn, not nearly as wet. She glanced at her surroundings, her cloudy jade eyes slipping over every detail she could see.

Sasori found it first, his hard, wooden fingers grazing over the kanji of one of the doors, it simply reading 'Lab Nine.' The carved kanji was smoother at the edges, almost as if they had been sanded, with the end of each stroke being rounded and not square and harsh like the others. It was a blatant sign.

"If he that overt?" Sakura asked aloud, her gaze sliding over to view Sasori from their corner of her eyes.

"Perhaps." Was his simple reply and Sakura didn't know how to take it, but by the way Deidara shifted behind her she didn't think it was good.

Sasori's fingers slid between the gap that had been left between the door and the jamb, a clear sign the room had been opened. As his fingers grasped the door, he softly opened it, Deidara and Sakura both taking a small step back to brace themselves for an ambush or trap.

But nothing came.

Sasori now taking the lead they entered the room, finding more evidence that they were on the right path to Orochimaru's death bed. This room was much more meticulously planned than any other they had investigated previously, everything was carefully laid out, everything seemingly in its right place, sterile, clinical.

Sakura took the room in as a whole, from the clean, dark green shelvings that lined the walls to the cold, sterile dissection table that lay within the the soft warm glow of candlelight that had permeated most of the hideout by now, this room was stark in it's unabashed brilliant white shine. Large, hand drawn medical diagrams hung like prized tapestries from ceiling to floor, catching Sakura's attention.

"Sasuke." It was a soft whisper under her voice, a sort of terrified reverence as her eyes hungrily devoured the diagram that took up the middle of a trio. An entire body had been drawn out, but there was no discernible signs that it was the fabled Uchiha, except for the small Kanji of his name and an equally small Uchiha fan symbol in the top right corner. Sakura's eyes fed on the small notes detailing certain aspects of his body, telling of experiments and enhancements that had been carried out on the boy Orochimaru had indoctrinated all those years ago.

The eyes of the diagram had been slashed out.

Sakura ripped the diagram from its hanging place, quickly rolling the large scroll up and slapping a closing seal upon it. *This is better than anything else I could have hoped for.* Her inner voice was almost feverish, ecstatic to have access to such information.

"That's not what we're here for, yeah." Sakura whipped her head around, her dirt covered pink locks sending out a soft plume of dust at such a violent action. Sakura eyed Deidara up in that second, curious to see if he was being actively serious in his reprimand or if he was simply poking fun at her for breaking standard mission protocol. The way his blue eyes sparked when his lips curled into that attention catching smile, she knew it was him attempting to have fun at her expensive.

She simply huffed in response, giving her hair a soft flick with her hand.

"It could prove very valuable for future missions." While it had not been Sakura's first intention
for the scroll, it would work as an excuse for now. Deidara's grin grew that little bit more, obviously amused and not buying the excuse for a second. Sakura wondered if he had seen exactly what the scroll held.

Securing it against her back, hidden under her cloak, she went back to searching the room. Her fingers dug through hand written journals, though no name was marked and she had no idea what Orochimaru's handwriting looked like. The journals spoke of horrific acts and experiments carried out upon numbered subject in a clinical, cold way, detailing each eminent failure in such detail that it made Sakura's skin crawl.

Even if there was a dark, nearly overwhelming curiosity to read on and find out what had transpired, what could be improved on Sakura set the book down. That was not a path of medicine Sakura wanted to walk down.

"Sakura." Sasori had found something. Abandoning her own search, she strode over to the other side of the room where Sasori stood, his blank eyes fixed upon the side of a bookshelf. As she came closer she could see his hand brushing a small, unrolled scroll to the side to, revealing a small hidden circular seal. Sasori's eyes flicked to her, the action nearly enough to startle Sakura.

'Unnatural.' She met his gaze with ease, regardless.

"Do you recognize this?" Sakura took the question to mean something else, as it seemed to be Sasori's style of asking her to do something. Taking the invitation to look closer at the seal, she leaned in, her shoulder absentmindedly barely brushing against Sasori's cloaked chest. She took a few scant seconds to recognize and identify the seal.

"It's a Konoha seal alright, a pretty high level one." Her eyes flicked back to Sasori to catch his full gaze before she caught Deidara looking at them from the corner of her eyes. Turning her attention to him she raised an eyebrow at the taller male, who had seemed to be frozen solid, an unreadable look on his face. Sakura ignored him, turning back to Sasori.

"Easy enough for me to deal with." She quipped, having come across these kinds of seals more than once in her life as a Konoha nin and apprentice to the Hokage. They were often used within the library to store high rank scrolls, or sake in the Hokage's office. Standing up straight, she made her way over to the dissection table to take a seat on the small, rollable chair that had been tucked underneath. Grasping one of the numerous carefully placed ink brushes and one of the inkwells she set to work.

Pushing her left sleeve up she exposed the inside of her forearm, her right hand already holding the ink wet brush. Beginning slowly at the elbow she carefully begun to inscribe the seals she would need to unlock the one written on the bookcase. It was slow going, especially with two men hovering over each shoulder watching. Sakura was not a seals expert, it was not her line of expertise, the only seals she had ever actively dealt with were those for her summons and her Byakugō no In.

Sakura stilled, her breath catching in her throat.

"What?" Deidara immediately asked, his lone, paranoid eye skimming around the room, his ears no doubt stretching to hear any unusual sound.

"Nothing." Sakura lied "I thought I forgot a symbol for a second there." Deidara responded with a disinterested 'yeah' and a roll of his lone orb but Sakura wasn't paying attention.

'Byakugō no In' She thought as she absentmindedly continued the seal up her forearm before beginning the inscription on the palm of her hand. "It's been dry for years now. I never had the
opportunity to fill it again, I was always too dry of chakra.’ The years had not been good for Sakura, constantly on the run and being hunted hadn't left her with any time to store excess chakra within her empty seal.

‘But now.’ Her cloudy jade eyes casually flicked from side to side where Sasori and Deidara stood, hidden by her down turned face and veil of hair. ‘I have...teammates. I have a safe place in Ame, I can begin again.’ Sakura's heart welled with an emotion that could only be described as excitement.

Maybe Sakura should have thought more in depth about what she was 'starting again.'

With a final flick of her wrist, the seal upon her arm was completed. The ink wound its way up from the crook of her elbow, along the inside of her forearm and spiralled out from her palm to the tips of her fingers. Sakura knew if she had gotten around to learning how to form seals with nothing but pure chakra instead of ink she'd have unseal the bookcase within a few seconds, she resolved to remedy that at a later time.

Striding back over to the bookcase, Deidara and Sasori following suit, she pushed chakra into the tips of her fingers, setting the seals on each five pads alight with a brilliant green glow. She could feel her own chakra spark along the length of her forearm, crackling along the skin as the rest of the seal activated. It was an uncomfortable feeling, but not one Sakura was entirely unused to, it simply felt like a less pleasant variation of her medical jutsu.

Reaching up to the seal, she pressed one of each finger to the small circles located within the seal upon the bookcase. She knew it had worked the second she felt a disgustingly familiar chakra spark against her fingertips. She had felt this chakra before, years ago within the Forest of Death, but it had been much more overwhelming at that time; now it was faded and meek beneath her fingertips. Brushing aside her disgust and revulsion, she began to turn her wrist, the circular sections beneath her fingers following with her movement as if she was turning a lock, which would be the laymen explanation for exactly what she was doing.

Lining the seals up into the correct order, like opening a safe, rewarded Sakura with a soft click from the bookcase and dismal flare of chakra before the seal on her arm evaporated. Now pressing her palm fulling against the side of the bookcase, she pushed, pleased to feel the wooden construct shift beneath the heavy pressure. It slowly began to move backwards, revealing behind it another illuminated passageway.

The scent that wafted out from the stifled hall was nearly overwhelming.

It stunk of rot and decay, death and blood and bones and organs. Sakura could see Deidara take a step back as it finally hit him full force and it seemed even Sasori had been unprepared to be faced with such an odor. Sakura was lucky, not that she'd phrase it that way, to be so familiar with the scent that it didn't cause her much distress anymore.

‘Shinobi don't tend to hang around long enough to encounter this scent. They're all familiar with the odour of fresh spilled blood, but never the scent it leaves after it's been exposed for days. What the sight of a bloated body looks like after its been under the rays of the sun for weeks, the smell of perforated bowls, rotten and spoiled.’ Sakura could only spare Deidara a short, unsympathetic glance, realizing her time in the hospital's morgue and as medical ambassador to small countries and towns that had been affected by horrific illnesses and severe natural disasters had given her a one up on the two experienced males.

Taking a step into the hallway she briefly remembered her first encounter with such a stench, when she had been sent with a squad to the southern coast of the Land of Fire to deal with a devastating mudslide. It had been three days after the incident that her squad had arrived, full
decomposition had been well under way under the hot summer sun.

At only fourteen, Sakura had been unable to hold her food down.

Continuing down the hallway, Sakura took another turn only to be met with the sight that had inspired such a heinous scent. It wasn't much to look on, but that in itself was enough to inspire a sense of dread.

"Orochimaru was always fond of this trick." Sasori piped up from beside her, not even blinking.

Sakura was revolted that he'd call such a gruesome trap a 'trick.'

Before her lay a section of the roof firmly pressed to the ground, a sizeable piston jutting out from the centre of the large steel plate and ascending into the dark depth above, no doubt attached to a large motor that when activated, would slam down upon anyone who happened to be beneath it.

It seemed that whatever sound nin had found this passage before them had ended up rather flat.

At least, that's what Sakura could gather from the way that blood seemed to leak out from under the metal slab.

'It was without a doubt, quick.' Sakura mused blandly to herself, her foggy jade eyes flicking to the wall, gauging the blood splatter and how it would correlate to the force needed to achieve such a spray.

It was at this point Sasori took the lead, his eyes constantly moving over the walls and floor as he walked over the steel plate and the bodies of the unfortunate souls that fell to such a trap.

"At least we know the ring is still down here, yeah?" Deidara quipped, speaking up for the first time in awhile, Sakura cut him a dry look, knowing it must have been killing him inside to keep quiet for this long. He simply returned the look with a grubby, cocky smirk.

It was a few more tense minutes filled with Sasori disabling two more traps before they had made it to what seemed like Orochimaru's inner sanctum. Sakura was, in hindsight, infinitely grateful for Leader-sama's foresight in sending Sasori with her, while she was sure she'd be able to navigate her way through all of this safely, it would have taken her days to be able to advance this far by herself.

That, or she would have just smashed her way through. Regardless of how hard she tried in her youth, Sakura was not a graceful, elegant princess type, she was brash, loud, slightly obnoxious in the right company and at times, impatient.

All the things she had once hated in Naruto.

'Now is not the time.' She mentally hissed at herself, quickly and quietly subduing her thoughts and putting her mind back on the task at hand.

'But when is the time?' She subconsciously argued with herself like she had as a child.

Dismissing such a thought, Sakura gazed through the doorway and into Orochimaru's death chamber. The door had seemingly been obliterated and the shards of wood lay in shambles around her feet. Stepping over the threshold and coming shoulder to shoulder with Sasori, Sakura was met with a disturbing sight.

Before her lay a colossal monster made up of hundreds of white snakes, the head of which could
only resemble a highly deformed Orochimaru.

"This is his true form?" She asked, almost breathlessly; Sasori nodded.

"I had not seen it before." He added as he stepped over the remains, heading towards the slumped, decayed body within the bed before them. 'Orochimaru's old shell.' Revulsion was a familiar feeling.

"How un artistic, yeah." Deidara quipped, adding his own input as he absentmindedly kicked the decapitated head of a snake across the room, a serious look of disgust painting his features. Another dry look was cast his way.

"I agree." The same look was thrown at Sasori for encouraging Deidara.

"See?! I knew you had potential, Sasori-danna! You agree with me that art's a fleeting moment, an explosion?" Deidara leered towards the man he called master, but all Sasori gave him was a dead, glassy look.

"Don't be a fool, fine art is eternal." It was at this point Sakura cut them out, seeing as they had lost all sight of the objective and had descended into unrepentant bickering. Approaching the right side of the bed, Sakura looked down onto the decaying, rotten body that had once housed Orochimaru's spirit and had in turn begun to resemble the horrible man, though it held little semblance now. Sadly he had not mummified, as would have been preferable to Sakura and her goal. The air had been too moist down here and it had affected the body negatively, even after all of the years he had resided here, rotten flesh still clung to bone and fetteled organs spilled from his ruptured body. He had obviously been picked at by rats, but by the bodies of the rats that lay around the bed they hadn't lasted long after their meal.

Spending no more time looking at the dead, Sakura reached for his hand, seeing that the entire arm had fallen from the shoulder socket and simply rested upon the bed. Taking care not to touch the dead body unnecessarily, her fingers grasped at the surface of the ring she had been ordered to retrieve. It took only a soft tug for the entire finger to come off the hand, the skin and rotted muscle tearing with ease. With another soft shake the rest of the digit fell away from the ring, falling to the bed with a quiet 'paff.'

Sakura took a few moments to look over the ring to check for any damages before slipping it into her coat pocket.

'It looks like I timed that perfectly.' Sakura bitterly thought to herself to turn, Sasori and Deidara now dead quiet as all three gazed out the doorway. 'It seems we have company.'

The trio did not wait patiently for the insurgents to simply make their move, instead all three sprung into action. In a flurry of activity, Sasori had already unravelled a scroll and had two puppets out and ready for action, both of which were small in stature, female and nearly identical.

It seemed being in close quarters did not dampen Deidara's ability to fight with his notoriously explosive style, his hands and mouths had moved quickly and seamlessly. A small colony of ants erupted from his hands, quickly swarming around the edges of the door along the wall. Deidara cast her a stern gaze, instantly telling her of his plans without having to open his mouth. Sakura simply nodded.

'Good plan, blow the only entrance as they come in.' It was only then that they waited for their unseen opponents to make their move, Deidara on the left of the door, Sasori to the right, and Sakura in front of it, next the bed in the most vulnerable, exposed position. It was a good position, Sakura's would lure them in for a frontal attack, Sasori and Deidara would take them out as they
came in one by one. All three shared a glance and Sakura knew they all held similar thoughts.

'*First one comes to me, second for Sasori and Deidara blows the door for the third. If any more are out there they'll be delayed by the explosion giving us enough time to get rid of the first three.*' It was a sound plan and one that relied on communication and teamwork.

Sakura almost felt giddy with excitement and anticipation to be working along side shinobi once more.

*I'd forgotten this feeling.* Her inner monologue was rushed and excited as she slipped on her worn leather, fingerless gloves. *'What it feels like to fight alongside others, to fight to protect, not just to mindlessly kill to survive.'*

It was this kind of fighting that got Sakura excited.

The room stilled as soft, musical notes began to lull into the room, Sakura tensed as the uneasy sound infiltrated her ears. It was haunting in its melody and very, very off putting in tone. It took her a split second to feel the genjutsu being carried along with the harmony, and even less to dispel it with a well placed "Kai!" but it had been too late.

The oto shinobi had only needed that split second of dulled senses to make their move, and it certainly was an attention catching one.

A loud destructive boom resonated through the room as a large, muscular man ripped through the doorway, the colossal axe he carried wiping out the left side of the doorway, sending a spray of explosive ants back towards deidara as well as scattering them throughout the room. Sakura cursed as she ducked under the massive axe that had been aimed for her head, aware that their plan had been ruined in one movement.

It was a free for all now and she'd just have to trust Deidara not to blow them all up.

Casting a look up from her crouched position up to the man who had desired to take her head clean off her shoulders, she was met with an equally murderous glare gazing out from between a face full of bandages. The muscles in his arm tensed as he begun to pull the axe back and out of the wall as quickly as he could, but the resistance he met from impaling the axe so deep into the stone left Sakura enough time to slam her chakra infused fist upwards, striking at where the blade met the handle.

The man pulled back nothing but wood, the edge now left buried deep within the wall.

He sprung back and away from Sakura as she sent another fist towards him, aiming squarely at his face in an uppercut as she rose from her crouch. He landed firmly on his feet the in area Sasori once stood and Sakura had to wonder briefly where the puppet man had gone to.

Wasting no more time she lunged forward, intent to bring this fight to an end as quickly as possible. She launched into a series of taijutsu attacks, but it seemed the man knew of her or had at least cottoned onto her style of fighting very quickly as he made sure not to block her punches and kicks straight on, instead he took to defending blows by deflecting her at the forearm or shin. Snarling to herself, she changed plans in a split second, sending her foot towards his midsection in a roundhouse kick. He of course blocked it with a single arm at the shin as he stepped into it, but it was what Sakura had been hoping for as she pulled her leg toward herself, catching him behind the arm with her foot. In a split second she used her foot to turn him away from her, his back vulnerable to her.

With a well placed, chakra enhanced boot in the back, he flew towards the door and as he passed...
over the threshold a voice cried out with an excited "Katsu!" The explosion ripped the man apart, coating the walls with a fine spray of blood. the doorway collapsed inwards as the rest of the wall fell into the hallway, the oto nin she had briefly fought with now nowhere to be seen.

'Well, that's not quite true.' Sakura spoke to herself as she watched a dismembered arm roll to a stop just in front of her. The explosion had probably been a bit more powerful than necessary, but as she looked over to see Deidara's face full of glee, she couldn't bring herself to reprimand him.

'He did get the job done.' She thought dryly to herself before she grew tense, the roof giving a soft rumble as a crack began to form overhead.

"Move." Was Sakura's stiff warning as the two missing nin threw themselves into the corridor, racing back towards the lab where they could hear a distant scuffle occurring. By the time they had arrived it had been dealt with as Sasori stood over the now dead figure of a young woman, no older than sixteen, a bamboo Sho laying by her ungrasping hand. As Sakura switched her gaze to Sasori, she immediately found herself on edge; the look of appraisal he was giving the girl was one Sakura had once been on the receiving end of.

'He wants her to become apart of his collection.' Today had been a bad day to eat, Sakura could only take so many stomach upsets before she was going to get indigestion.

"We should move, we have a the ring and that scuffle will no doubt bring more people. Leader-sama wanted us back as soon as possible." She cast a look at Sasori, almost baiting him with his compulsion to always be on time to get him to overlook the dead girl and his desire to make her into a puppet. It didn't seem to work as the puppet boy bent down on one knee, grasping at the sho with one hand and fiddling around for a sealing scroll with the other.

'It seems his art comes before even his desire to be on time.' Sakura thought to herself, gritting her teeth as she watched him store the woman's body within a scroll.

"Was it only these two?" She bit out a bit more harshly than she had intended, her eyes gazing around the room, now in a serious state of mess.

"Yes, though apparently he was her lover." The way he said it so blandly was astoundingly different to the way his eyes pierced into her, his dead auburn eyes seemingly now an intense, deep, dry blood red. He was looking for a reaction, knowing such information would make her feel something.

Sakura had enough restraint not to show a damn thing.

"Yeah well he's in itsy-bitsy pieces back there if her spirit wants to go fucking reunite with him or something, yeah." Deidara bit out remorselessly as he motioned over his shoulder with a thumb, looking entirely disinterested with the whole thing. Sakura bit her tongue, taking her leave of the laboratory and beginning her trek back to the centre of the hideout.

'They were idiots.' Sakura hissed to herself within her head, hoping the burn in her throat would subside. *They had to have known there would be no way they would win.*

Their ascent back up the hideout's inner core was uneventful, they had seen flickers of movement and signs of life, but none had sought them out for a fight. It seems their previous scuffles had an effect on the surviving nins. The had let them be, especially at Sasori's behest, his constant pushing for them to hurry up slowly burning on Sakura's nerves.

They had met no resistance on the craters surface and had taken flight as soon as Deidara had constructed a new mode of transportation; they had no need to hide any longer, there was nothing
Sakura gave a soft, relaxed sigh as she slipped through the trees that lead from the clearing they had landed in, her eyes stuck to the smooth, shadowed, waters surface ahead. She had been looking forward to this since she'd laid eyes upon the soft crook in the river. It was sheltered and secluded, the mangrove trees arching their branches to entwine over the small pool that had been created in the inlet, creating a soft canopy that let small ribbons of light illuminate the clear depths. The small section she stood on that lead down to the refreshing, mountain chilled water was sandy and pliable beneath her feet, a few rocks scattered here and there.

Shedding her cloak and large scroll, she began to undress, paying no heed to the men skulking up behind her.

"I don't think I've seen a girl get undressed so fast in my company before, Sakura-chan." Deidara quipped, a casual, lopsided smirk catching his lips. Sakura felt her upper lip twitch in agitation, having dealt with men like Deidara in the past.

'I haven't even gotten my boots off yet.' Turning she cut Deidara a foul look, but guessing by his grin it was the reaction he had been looking for. Sakura bit back the desire to respond in a similar, smart arse fashion but quelled that desire as Sasori saw fit to reprimand Deidara for her by jabbing him in the side with a no doubt very hard finger made of wood.

Unzipping the side of her boots she quickly shucked them off before tossing them over to where Sasori had decided to sit, obviously not interested in bathing.

'I suppose he doesn't sweat, no need to bathe other than cleaning joints.' Sakura curiously wondered if water would have an adverse effect on his joints and inner workings and if he instead had to deconstruct himself and simply give all his parts a thorough dusting.

"You need new footwear." It was a stern chide, but Sakura didn't take it too seriously.

"Yep." It was a simply, casual answer and by the way Sasori focused his gaze on her, was not an acceptable one. Sakura simply raised her eyebrows before her top was pulled up and over her head, leaving her in only the standard chainmail set.

"Buy new ones."

"Nah, they're fine." Deidara gave a snort from behind the veil of his midriff baring shirt currently halfway over his head, his chainmail following suit. It caught Sakura's attention, but not for the reasons one may expect.

Sakura's eyes skimmed Deidara's exposed arms, finally being given the knowledge she'd desired since the first time she had spotted him in the tavern, that question being 'Why the fuck did he still have both arms?'

'They've been reattached.' Sakura's interest perked immediately. 'I've never seen medical jutsu like that. Are they simply held on by the sutures? How are they able to function? Has his entire right elbow been replaced?' So was thinking of so many questions by answering none of them.

"Having a good look, Sakura-chan?" Deidara's lone eye was bright with mischief, his grin growing by the second. Sakura hadn't hidden her appraisal, but it seemed Deidara took it to mean something else.

"Rule number seven, don't sexualize your team members." Though Sakura took that exact break in thought to scan her eyes over Deidara now completely naked body, the older male having no
qualms about his own nudity. Her eyes caught on the seal but she wasted no time investigating it. Deidara scoffed at her recital of the shinobi rules, obviously finding her adherence to them ironic at best.

"That, and I was curious about your arms." Sakura broke eye contact by pulling her chainmail off, throwing it over to where her shirt lay beside Sasori.

Sasori, the man who seemed to be watching her very, very intently now that she was only in her chest binder and pants. Sakura absentmindedly felt the desire to cross her arms and hide her body from his gaze, but she couldn't read any sense of perverted lust within his eyes. It was an unreadable look, but by no means did it make her less uneasy.

"Oh, so you're curious, yeah?" Deidara broke her from her own caught up thoughts, dragging her attention back to him. She was met with two eyes this time and it almost startled her to see his hidden eye out and about with no scope to cover it. She could see a ring of sweat, dirt and grime around his left eye, having collected around the edges of his scope.

"Yes, how did you get them? Who reattached them? How are they attached?" Sakura rambled off, pleased to find she was going to get some answers, in the mean time she shucked off her own pants. Deidara simply chuckled, a deep sound that welled up from within his chest as he walked past her, descending into the clear water.

Sakura would be lying if she said she didn't watch the smooth ripple of muscle along the length of his back shift and move as he walked past her, even turning to continue watching him. Her eyes dipped lower still.

"It's not that simple, Sakura-chan, yeah?" He chirped as he waded into the water and Sakura knew she'd be paying for any information he gave her, in one way or another. Her fingers grasped at her binder, pulling it up and over her head as she exposed her breasts to the fresh, mountain air. She rubbed at the pressure marks left behind, feeling a sense of relief and pleasure well within her at such a satisfying action.

"What do you want?" She called back, bored now that she wasn't getting her answers for free. She shuffled out of her pants, dropping her own black boxer briefs down her legs at the same time. Once again, thrown to where Sasori sat, but this time she didn't want to face the man she now stood naked in front of.

'I wonder if he can see the scar he left me.' She thought absentmindedly, her gaze staying upon that of the now water happy Deidara. She didn't miss the way that Deidara's gaze slid up her body, taking her in. She didn't know if it was out of curiosity, as this had been the first time they'd seen her with nothing on, or out of a perverted, sexual desire.

"You're a bit beefy, aren't you, yeah?" He quipped it so offhandedly that it stung twice as bad. Just because Sakura lacked modesty and viewed her body as a prime tool, didn't mean it didn't still kick her self-esteem to hear someone dismiss it. She stomped towards the water, intent on hiding herself within it to avoid anymore criticism.

Dunking herself in the frigid water, she ignored the way Deidara laughed at her reaction, intent on ducking her head under the water before viciously scrubbing at her dirty pink hair.

"It's impressive, Sakura-chan!" Deidara chirped, but it did little to catch Sakura's attention, as she simply assumed it would be followed by another insult. "It shows you're a very dedicated shinobi. You're very committed to your art." It was softer this time and distinctly missing Deidara's odd vocal quirk.
"I don't make art." She bit out, mildly soothed that he took her appearance for what it was, that of one built on years of hard work and dedication. Deidara simply began laughing even harder than before, and Sakura wondered if he was going to slip under the water's surface and drown himself. 'If only.' She thought amusedly to herself.

"Now, what do you want?" Sakura switched the topic back before Deidara could respond and potentially insult her any further. She still had questions she wanted answered.

"That's easy Sakura-chan, an answer for an answer, yeah?" Sakura's eye narrowed, not exactly pleased with the asking price. "You ask me something, I ask you something."

"Think of it as a...team building exercise, yeah?"

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Chapter End Notes

Notes

Byakugō no In is the seal Tsunade and Sakura have, it's the "Strength of a Hundred." Sakura's has been completely depleted, hence why it doesn't show up on her.

A Sho is a traditional japanese instrument made with slender bamboo pipes, if you'd like to hear what it sounds like, go to youtube and put this in the url /watch?v=yUpr1F1dZt0 deleting any spaces!

A/N: Casual nudity, ahoy! Sakura perving on dat ass. She knows she's physically attracted to Deidara, but she damn well wont act on it this early on, Physical attraction /=/= romantic attraction. She can admit he's handsome but she still thinks he's a bit of a kidnapping prick at this moment in time. What does Deidara think? Welp, we'll find out sooner or later!
Her light destroyed, Sakura now finds herself on a path she never thought she'd take, that of a missing-nin. Rumors of her status are spreading, and one organization has taken notice. Redemption is offered, will it be taken? Will the light of her life be replaced with a catastrophic boom?

A/N Sorry that this was up late, I was busy with the new Pokemon game! 'v'

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

WARNING
CHAPTER CONTAINS DESCRIPTION OF CASUAL NUDITY.

Recap

"Now, what do you want?" Sakura switched the topic back before Deidara could respond and potentially insult her any further. She still had questions she wanted answered.

"That's easy Sakura-chan, an answer for an answer, yeah?" Sakura's eye narrowed, not exactly pleased with the asking price. "You ask me something, I ask you something."

"Think of it as a...team building exercise, yeah?"

Questioning Thoughts

Chapter ten

The water swirled around her breasts, cooling the aches and strains that permeated through her body. The water was gentle, chilled and above all else, soothing, but it did little to alleviate the annoyance she felt over her situation. Her eyebrows pinched as she wondered if the answers she'd receive would be worth it. Glancing at the blondes arms again, she conceded it was.

'Such a technique could be incredibly useful.' Sakura was always told she was too studious for her own good.

"Who reattached your arms?" She had been sitting there for over five minutes, watching Deidara clean himself, waiting for him to ask the first question. When he had finished and reclined to enjoy the brief interlude between missions with no question forthcoming, Sakura had lost her polite patience. Deidara's lips quirked in one corner, as if he had been waiting for her reaction.

"Kakuzu, yeah." Sakura's eyebrows pinched further as she stared him down, hoping for more information without having to ask for it and potentially costing her more. Sakura had gotten very, very good at pulling information out of people when they didn't want to give it up, a skill she had Kaishoku Gake's bartering system to thank for. Deidara rolled his eyes before responding.
"The big dude next to Hidan? His partner. We call 'em the Zombie Combo." He finished with an amused smirk as Sakura heard Sasori scoff in the distance, obviously finding the nickname distasteful. All it did for Sakura was make her more curious, but she would not follow that line of questioning.

Sakura leaned backwards to contemplate the answer while she waited for Deidara to ask his own question, her back pressing up against the outstretching mangrove roots, the soft bark digging into her skin.

'I don't have any information on Kakuzu, no one in Konoha has ever met him in battle. I don't know his fighting style or any personal information.' Sakura grit her teeth as she remembered one little snippet of information she had remembered one little snippet of information she had remembered from her days in Konoha. There was the Fire Temple incident. The description of one of the attacker fits Hidan, so I'm guessing his partner at the time was Kakuzu.'

The mission report filed by Asuma's Nijū Shōtai hadn't been of much use at the time, as they had arrived too late to confront the Akatsuki team. It left Sakura little information to go on, the only thing she was sure of was that the two men, the "Zombie combo" were exceedingly dangerous and would have to be watched carefully.

'One of them is highly aggressive. Could Kakuzu possibly be a healer or some kind?' Sakura's eyes wandered over to Deidara again, picking apart his arms and critiquing the stitch work and reattachment.

'No, that's no work of a medic-nin. The lines are jagged and the stitching mediocre, like that of a standard nin doing a field patch up.' Scratching her head she glanced back up at Deidara, desiring to ask more questions but knowing it would be best to wait for him to ask his. The last thing she wanted to do was work up a debt she couldn't pay off.

He was absentmindedly cleaning himself once more, obviously not content with his level of cleanliness. He seemed to be focused more on his torso, the pads of his fingers rubbing against the paler skin of his chest, usually covered up and not toasted to that delicious golden brown that his arms, face and neck shared. His nails scraped against his flesh, leaving white trails that blazed red not too soon after, trying to scratch off the stubborn dirt that had worked its way under his shirt and chainmail.

He slipped lower still, both hands coming to work on his abdomen, rubbing in soft circles to try and work the dirt into a muddy lather to easily wash it off, but it didn't seem to be working. The grime had soaked into the sweat and then set flush against his taut skin. As he smoothed his hands down his softly defined abs, Sakura could spot a pair of tongues sliding out leisurely from their concealed locations.

He was licking himself like a cat.

As his hands descended further, his tongue lathered over the soft bumps of his abs, not overly defined as was common in long range fighters, but defined enough that you could see where they were and no doubt feel them beneath your fingers. A tongue tip dipped into his belly button as his fingertips plunged into his thick thatch of blonde pubic hair, Sakura's breath caught in her throat and-

"So," Her fiery emerald eyes snapped up to his just in time to see him gaze up at her, no hint of amusement or anything more in his eyes. Sakura let the breath in her throat go with a nod, pleased to find she hadn't been caught. "what made you change your mind, yeah?"

Sakura gave a sigh, knowing that this question had been coming.
"I was convinced otherwise." The look Deidara was giving her was dry and unimpressed; he had expanded on his answer and it seemed she would be expected to do the same. She sighed again before elaborating further.

"I had some misconceptions about Akatsuki's goal, which Leader-sama was gracious enough to explain in depth to me." She turned her face downwards, seeing her reflection within the surface of the water below her as she continued in a soft voice. "It turns out that they coincide with my own goals and beliefs."

"Really, and what would those be, yeah?" Sakura's head snapped up, her wet pink locks flicking slightly at such a quick, sudden movement.

"To live to serve others, to live a life as unselfishly as possible." Deidara snorted, opening his mouth to rebuke her but Sakura didn't let him have that opening. "Leader-sama did not phrase it that way, but that is what I see at the core of his plans. He wants what is best for others, he wants to bring light to a dark future, he wants to help those that cannot help themselves, through the strength he has earned." Sakura grit her teeth, the similarity to Naruto staggering now that she delved into the depths of Akatsuki's plans.

"He is like Naruto. Though he lacks the same heart, both of their eyes are fixed ahead of them, staring into a bright future. They share the same vision." Her eyes peered into Deidara, alight with unearthly fire that burned deep into her soul as she spoke with conviction and heart. "Naruto's Nindo is my own, his goals are now mine to carry, but I wont be selfish, I wont make that mistake again. Akatsuki will be the vessel in which I see Naruto dream come to fruition."

"Naruto was the kyuubi boy, was he not?" This question came from Sasori, his subtle, understated voice reaching her from his sitting place. At Sakura's nod, Deidara gave a scoff, folding his arms over his chest. Sakura was aware of their run in several years back, and it seemed to have left its mark.

"You would be naive to think all Akatsuki members subscribe to Leader-sama's god complex and fanciful ideals." Sasori continued, standing from his perch and slowly beginning his walk over to the waters edge, Sakura's eyes watching him. "Not all of us joined as willingly as you did." His last comment was accompanied with a vague hand motion and Sakura cut Deidara a look from the corner of her eyes briefly.

"A lot of us simply use Akatsuki as a means to achieve our own goals and desires, like you." Sasori crouched at the waters edge, a scant few feet away from her as he met her eyes once more, the dead glassy surface reflecting the vibrant, crystal sheen the water gave off. "Do not think they are as pleasant and self-sacrificing as yours." He finished by whipping out his hand, a flash of metal whizzing towards her head. It was caught easily and without worry as she looked down on the small object, the disgustingly dirty and rancid smelling ring laying within her palm.

Sakura broke eye contact as she plunged the ring into the water, beginning to briskly scrub the offending particles from the smooth metal surface. She wished to bite back at the puppet boy, ask him what his desires and goals were, to ask Deidara how he had become a member, but she knew it would cost her. She had other questions that needed answering before she delved into their personal lives like they were doing to her.

"I'm no fool, Sasori." She looked up from her task to see the back of the puppet master, having decided to reclaim his perch over by Sakura's discarded clothing. Sakura bit her tongue, not willing to call him out on such a small, disrespectful slight.

Turning her attention back to the ring that had just recently been secured around the digit of the
notorious, yet dead, Orochimaru, she once again resumed cleaning it, her thumb nail being used to scrape off the dead skin that had clung to the metal surface.

"Your turn Sakura-chan, yeah!" Deidara chirped, hoping to grab Sakura's attention back with a bolstered, overly chirpy attitude. It seemed to work as Sakura looked over at Deidara once more, surprised to find him half walking half paddling over to her side of the inlet. She raised an eyebrow but let him be.

"How are they attached?" She asked as he took a seat beside her, once more crossing his arms over his chest. Sakura's eyes gazed down to his arms, a small desire to touch and prod and examine building in her.

"Dunno." Was the simple reply once more, a blinding grin following such an admission. Sakura's upper lip twitched in annoyance as she felt a vein in her forehead throb, her fist clenching automatically. She did not want to go through this every time she asked a question.

"I mean, I don't know how it technically works, yeah? No need to look at me like that." Deidara held both hands up in a placating motion. He'd nearly been punched once today and his bruise was still healing from the first punch she had landed. "All I know is Kakuzu found an arm and an elbow and sewed them back on with his freaky thread bullshit, yeah?"

Sakura nodded, though not quite pleased with the lack of a true answer. It seemed Deidara didn't care to learn how his arm had been reattached as long as they worked. Deidara opened his mouth again, ready to ask another question when Sakura interrupted him, holding a single finger up in the air in the space between their faces.

"You asked two questions." For once it was Sakura wearing the sly, roguish grin and Deidara didn't know how to take that.

"So, is it a Kekkei Genkai, kinjutsu or some really fucked up body experiment?" Sakura asked with little to no tact, not that she thought Deidara would mind, he didn't seem to be the type to exercise restraint. The grin that lit up his face let her know he didn't mind her phrasing at all.

"Bit of this, bit of that." Sakura raised an eyebrow, curious. "I wasn't born with these, yeah? But I was born with something unique and relatively unheard of. It was, in a sense, a Kekkei Genkai, or at least the start of one." Sakura stood at attention, her back bouncing off the roots as she leaned forwards, coming closer to Deidara with excitement in her eyes. Deidara was amused by the reaction, though seemingly used to it. His smugness seemed to grow twofold.

'A new type of Kekkei Genkai? A new one hasn't been documented in the last fifty years and Deidara managed to get to his age without word getting out? Iwa must have done a fine job of keeping that under wraps.'

"One other family member had it, a distance uncle, but he's dead now so that leaves me as the only person possessing this Kekkei Genkai, yeah." He seemed overly smug about it, but Sakura could see why. In the world of shinobi, possessing a Kekkai Genkai gave you privilege above all other, let alone one that no one else possessed. The social standing Deidara would have possessed in Iwa would have been astronomical, which made it all the more interesting as to why he had left.

'But then, privilege and power hadn't stopped Sasuke, had it? If anything it drives them to seek more.' Sakura's jaw creaked as she clenched her teeth.

"It was named Bakuton, as the Kekkei Genkai imbued me with explosive chakra. Anything I touched, anything I put my chakra into, became an explosive." Sakura briefly wondered how destructive she could be if she managed to herself some of that chakra. 'It explains his ability, but
"These," Deidara remarked as he held up his hands beside his head, the tongue lolling about lewdly as they waggled at Sakura, though she gave no reaction more than an eyebrow raise. "are how I found myself as a missing-nin."

"Kinjutsu." It was a statement and not a question and Sakura would stand by that if Deidara tried to play her for it. Deidara nodded at her assessment.

"I wanted it, I wasn't allowed it, so I stole it from right under Onoki's fat nose, yeah." The smirk Deidara displayed was slightly vicious and quite unsettling, but Sakura was stuck on the way he had spoken the Tsuchikage's name. There was familiarity there.

"It allowed me to elevate my art to a whole new height, yeah."

"It's how Akatsuki noticed you." It was an offhanded remark, but by the way the teeth in his hands clenched closed, it hit a bit deeper than she had thought it would. He had answered a question without her even having to ask it.

"If you two are done with your bath we must head off, I will not tolerate being late." Sakura could detect the subtle annoyance Sasori never sought to hide.

"Oi, Sakura-chan still owes me an answer, Sasori-danna!" Deidara bit out, eyebrows pinched, voice verging on the edge of yelling.

"I really don't care, Brat." Deidara grit his teeth before stomping out of the water, yelling at his master a slew of insults directed at Sasori's prefered artistic medium. Sakura rolled her eyes and finished up her cleaning; once finished she dragged herself from the water and over to her clothing, still able to hear the half dressed Deidara bitching from a few tree's away as he stomped his way back to the clearing to prepare for their journey.

Sakura paid no mind to Sasori as she reached down to her clothing, beginning the slow, leisurely task of dressing herself. She was sure she'd hear a hastily jabbed remark about her taking her sweet time from Sasori and any second, but until then she'd take as long as she wanted. Her underwear and pants were first to take their position before she begun to slip her shoes back on, desiring to remain without her binder for as long as possible. It had been a long time since she had worn one, never having sought to replace her broken one when on the lam.  

"They're tighter than I remembered.' Sakura was lucky that her breasts were small enough not to need a bra, but the extra support and protection that came from using a binder were above any discomfort as she might face. With a sigh she grabbed the binder as she stood up, only to feel the cold, hard touch of wood press against her lower back.

As she whipped around she found a kunai in hand, defensively holding it in front of her. She stared Sasori down with a hard, angered look, daring him to come closer and invade the space between them so she could drive the sharp point through his heart. Chiyo may have missed once, but Sakura would not make that mistake.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Sakura heart was racing, creeping memories of a fight long past sneaking up from forgotten depths; Sakura knew what he was doing, what he was touching, because some times when the humidity was low and temperature high, that scar he left her throbbed.

Sasori simply stood there, watching her, not moving or speaking or doing anything to assure Sakura it was a mistake and that this encounter wasn't going to leave one of them dead. Her hand
tightly around the kunai as she wondered if Deidara could hear her from here.

"There's no saying he wouldn't side with Sasori, it would be best if he was not alerted." It was then
Sakura realized that she had made a very dangerous mistake of being alone with Sasori in the first
place.

"You are very different from when we first met, Sakura." There was a soft elegance to Sasori's
voice that she found uncommon from a Suna native, but not something she wanted to think about
right now. Sasori's eyes connected with hers and she swore she could see mirth held within the
glass orbs.

"Am I less attractive to you now, Sasori?" Sakura bit out, remembering how he had desired to
make her into one of his controlled, dancing puppets, wondering if her hard, unfeminine body
turned him away from her like it did so many men before. So many men drawn in by a cherubic
face only to be confronted with the harsh, strong body of a shinobi.

Sasori gave a soft smile though his eyes were bright and manic, it seemed so out of place on the
short, ever eternal boy that Sakura was forced to take a step back least she drive her kunai
between his eyes.

"He's your comrade now, you have to give him the benefit of the doubt. He hasn't attacked yet,
he's done nothing to warrant a death." It was hard for Sakura to talk herself down from brutally
murdering someone that had haunted her for a good portion of her teenage years.

"If you think for a second that art" His grin grew that little bit more at the way he hissed the word.
"bends to the heels of societies perceived notions of beauty you are very wrong, Sakura." As he
took a step forward Sakura held her ground, deciding this would be her last stand if one was to be
made.

"I desire you to be mine even more now than I did back then." He turned from her then, walking
away from her so casually that Sakura nearly went through with her desire to drive the blade
through the back of his heart container. "I shall talk to Leader-sama upon our return, I will inform
him that I think it best you join Deidara and I as another facet to our team. Your skills fill an empty
slot and" He paused as he turned to enter the path winding between the trees that lead to the small
clearing they would depart from.

"if you are to die, I will be there to collect your body." And with that, he faded into the trees,
leaving Sakura even more uncomfortable than before.

'If he thinks for a second I will comply to being placed within this unit he's more a fool than I
thought.'

The trip back had been long, cramped and entirely uneventful. They had landed within the same
small clearing they had once departed from and had begun their trek back to Amegakure. Sakura
had not missed the rain.

Their arrival was quiet and subdued, but there was no hiding or sneaking this time, they had
simply walked through one of the gates, their cloaks acting like identification cards. The time had
been around three am, about two hours short of happy hour ending, not that Sakura felt the need
to drink her woes under the table at this point in time.

'The mission went surprisingly well.' She thought blandly to herself, too tired from the travel and
lack of sleep to put any deep thought into the statement. If she'd been a bit more lucid she might
have remembered the way Deidara nearly blew up an entire mountain. 'We got the ring, no one
died and no one got hurt.' There was definitely a strict ranking as to what was 'good' on a mission.

She hadn't paid any attention as they walked through the streets or entered the Akatsuki stronghold, she only gave a mild, interested look at her companions as the trio came to a stop outside of her room. Sasori had only stopped from a brief few seconds, giving her a small nod before departing, not wanting to cause excess noise and wake anyone that slumbered beyond the other doors.

Deidara stayed.

"It was fun working with you, Sakura-chan, yeah." He beamed and Sakura could make out his teeth even in the dark hallway, no one having bothered flicking on a light yet. Sakura responded with a nod, agreeing with him to a certain extent, as she slowly peeled off the seal closing her door. It had been a long time since she had fought side by side with competent ninja, it left her with a homely, warm feeling.

Deidara leaned in closer, arms crossed over his chest until his lips were a few scant inches away from her ear. Sakura's hand gripped the doorknob as she contemplated simply pushing through and slamming the door in his face to end this now awkward encounter.

"I'll come collect later, yeah?" It was soft, dark and whispered, making Sakura feel just that little bit uncomfortable. Deidara turned and left, leaving Sakura alone in the dark hallway.

With a huff she centred herself, pushing in the door and entering her bedroom once more. She had only been gone for one night but the scent of stale air hung in her room. It was then that it hit Sakura just how fast the mission had actually been.

'Only one night?' Her eyes pierced through the darkness after Deidara, astounded that such a technique could effect a mission so heavily. 'That mission would have taken at least a month.' She began disrobing as her minds picked over the travel time and the mission in depth until she was only left in her black, standard issue underwear. Taking a seat at her small desk she cleared some medical instruments and large textbooks out of the way as she dragged over a blank scroll and small bottle of ink.

She began to fill out the scroll, writing down the mission details in accurate points listing their movements, times and actions taken in brief sentences. As she finished with the short debriefing she continued on to describe the mission in depth, leaving out certain aspects like arguments and awkward, uncomfortable moments. Eventually she begun to pick apart in her head how they had worked in a three person formation, there were certainly problems but for the most part they had worked extremely well together.

While yes the teamwork could do with some work, but by the last fight they had worked like a well oiled machine.

'Perhaps Sasori was correct? Maybe we would make a good team.' Sakura bit her tongue for having entertained such a thought. 'Or maybe the team will be as dysfunctional as the original Team Seven. It would end up with someone dead.'

Sakura was logical enough to see both sides of the coins, but emotional enough to side with the one she prefered. She would talk to Pein tomorrow, give her report and tell him that she would prefer to work in a medical role stationed with Amegakure.

Leaving her scroll unravelled to dry, she slipped into bed, not having bothered to get change - Kakashi would skin her alive to know she had slept so unprepared for an assault- and promptly fell asleep.
The next morning she had been up at around seven, pleased with the four hours of uninterrupted sleep. She had changed quickly, stuffed the ring and mission scroll into a small pocket within her cloak and set off looking for Pein. Sakura had assumed he would be located at the highest point within the keep and it seems like she had guessed correctly.

"I said no, Sasori." Pein's voice was low and monotonous as ever, but it instantly caught Sakura's attention as she came to a stop, roughly five feet away from the door his voice permeated through. She held her breath as she took a few small steps forward, intensely interested in the conversation taking place.

"She would fit well within our team." unmistakably Sasori's voice and unmistakably her they were talking about. "She makes up for our lack in close range techniques, is a level headed, intelligent and can work around challenging difficulties, can keep up Deidara in his unartistic destruction but can also work elegantly with my own puppets. She is also very adept with medical jutsu which Deidara needs as he continuously gets himself mutilated. It only took two fights and he was armless and defenseless. There is also her extensive knowledge about Kono-"

"I said no." Sakura nearly took a step back as Pein's sheer presence pressed against her, his voice hadn't changed at all but by the way he reacted non-verbally had shut Sasori up. "All of the points you make are the exact reasons that make her a valuable asset to any of the other teams. Haruno will not be made a permanent member to any of the teams."

Sakura could nearly scream in joy, but instead settled for making a silent 'Shannaro!' and pumping her fist in the air.

As the door opened before her and Sasori filtered out Sakura couldn't hide her sense of satisfaction, an incredibly smug look settling on her face as she stared the short male down. 'I know I'm antagonizing him,' Her smug smirk grew that little bit more as his eyes narrowed. 'but I cannot bring myself to care.'

"Haruno-san, please, come in." Pein's subdued, deep voice brought her back as he gazed out from beyond his open door. She gave a small nod, swooping pass the departing Sasori and into what she would come to call Pein's office.

"Sasori has informed me the mission was a success, do you have the ring with you?" Pein asked before Sakura gave another nod, pulling the ring from her pocket along with her mission scroll, handing them both to the taller, imposing man.

"Yes, I also completed writing the mission debriefing last night as well." She finished with a respectful bow at the waist.

"That's a first." Came the soft, feminine voice of Konan as she glanced at Sakura from her position by a large, bay window. "Normally the men give it to us verbally." Konan approached Pein, taking the scroll from him and opening it to begin reading. "What a nice change for once." Her tone was pleased and Sakura took it as a complement; Tsunade had beat the importance of paperwork into her from an early age, even if it was only because she wanted to get out of doing it herself.

Pein walked towards his desk, a large scroll already unravelled across its surface as Sakura broke from her respectful bow. She followed as Pein motioned her over, now standing behind his desk with Sakura in front.

'I've never seen a seal like this.' It looked complicated and old, some of the symbols she had only ever seen replicated in books. The seal was made up of three circles, one large one in the middle
and two smaller ones on each side. The right, smaller circle had the symbol for Sky, mirroring the ring, so it was no surprise when Pein placed the ring within it. The large middle circle was empty, but surrounded by interlocking symbols Sakura had never seen outside of a book, having assumed they were obsolete.

"Sakura-san, please place your left hand here." Konan asked politely, her hand motioning towards the left circle. Sakura complied, though not without an odd sense of trepidation welling up within her. Apart from the Byakugō no In Sakura had never been on the receiving end of a sealing ceremony; she had never even participated in one.

The paper felt old and worn under her hand, the scroll was no doubt older than she was if her theory was correct. The likelihood of this scroll dating back to pre-war time is great, it might have even existed before the shinobi villages came into creation. The books I read dated these symbols to the beginning of the shinobi way, it coul-

"Sakura, look at me." Without a second thought Sakura looked up, only to feel the bottom of her world drop out below her as she felt the pulse of the rinnegan flood through her body. A gasping, desperate breath in was all she could muster as she panicked, her existence being pulled into one infinitesimal dot within the centre of Pein iris.

If she had the ability to look down Sakura would have noticed that the seal had been activated, Pein’s hand within the large middle circle flaring with overwhelming chakra. The symbols seemed to bleed into brilliant purple chakra chains, swallowing both her hand and the ring in their effervescent glow.

But before Sakura could come to realization that she wasn’t going to die the ceremony was completed, which let Sakura free from Pein’s all consuming gaze as she ripped her hand back and away.

"Calm yourself." It was a soft voice that brought back some sense as Sakura's panicked eyes flicked to Konan, the older woman's hand outstretched and placed upon her shoulder. Sakura no doubt resembled a Deer caught in the presence of a lion as she panted heavily, feeling a few beads of sweat descend from her hairline.

"It's been done, Haruno-san." Pein informed her with a casual side glance, causing Sakura to flinch, the sensation of the Rinnegan still fresh within her mind and still permeating her body.

Holding up her left hand to check that it was still intact, she was greeted by the sterling ring now transfixed around her left little finger and nails blacker than any polish she’d ever been able to buy.

"Welcome to Akatsuki, Haruno Sakura."

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Please rate and review, if you have the time to!
What takes you a few seconds to do lasts me a life time

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Chapter End Notes

Notes
Nijū Shōtai - Squad of 20 or Twenty Platoons is a task force created by the Tsunade consisting of twenty four-man teams. Their mission is to scour the Land of Fire in search of members of Akatsuki. Basically that's when Asuma died, but he doesn't die fighting Hidan in this universe.

A/N: Sorry for the delay, but Pokemon! More casual Nudity and Sakura is now a fully fledged member of the Akatsuki! I wonder what her next mission will be, and I wonder with who? When will Deidara come to collect? Will more questions and answers be traded?
**Recap**

"It's been done, Haruno-san." Pein informed her with a casual side glance, causing Sakura to flinch, the sensation of the Rinnegan still fresh within her mind and still permeating her body. Holding up her left hand to check that it was still intact, she was greeted by the sterling ring now transfixed around her left little finger and nails blacker than any polish she'd ever been able to buy. 

"Welcome to Akatsuki, Haruno Sakura."

**Bored Thoughts**

Chapter eleven

Eyes still transfixed to the newly placed ring upon her pinkie, Sakura's mind quickly jumped over the hurdle that was the sealing ceremony. While at the time she thought she was going to die a horrible, painful death she realized had simply overreacted, she should have known they weren't going to kill her. She had been in plenty of life or death situation before and she was now acutely embarrassed with how she had acted. Lowering her hand before dropping into a kneeling position, head bowed and one hand outstretched to the floor to support herself.

"It will be an honour to work under you, Leader-sama." She said from her position beneath the gaze of both Konan and Pein, a position she had not held since she last reported to Tsunade. It made her bones feel weak and her eyes sting, but she kept it hidden. She did not see the soft nod the older man gave her, although he did not wave her up from her position.
"Haruno-san, do you wish to move onto your next assignment or would you prefer to take a few days to rest?" Pein asked calmly, walking around from behind the desk to come stand at Sakura's side. Sakura pursed her lips, knowing exactly how to read between the lines of what Pein was asking. He was asking Sakura to set her pace, was she the type of shinobi who could perform back to back missions without burning out, or was she the type to pace herself?

If it had been anyone else to ask her, she no doubt would have chosen the former option, always keen to prove herself and her worth, a habit that had stuck since her teenage years.

'But,' She took a deep breath, 'I have nothing to prove to these two. They would not have tried so hard to recruit me if they thought I was unworthy.'

"A few days rest would be preferable, Leader-sama." Pein nodded and it was at that time he motioned with his hand for her to rise. Standing from her position, Sakura gave another respectful nod.

"You can take three days to learn about your new position within the organization." Before Sakura could open her mouth to ask what exactly her new position was, Konan continued for him.

"As our residence Medical nin you will be in charge of maintaining our shinobi's health. You have been assigned a medical bay. Here are the files we have on our current members and any past injuries or health issue." Konan held out the stack of files, but as Sakura reached out to grasp them Konan did not let go, instead she fixed Sakura with a stern, telling gaze. "I have no reason to tell you how valuable these files are and what the consequences would be if the information held within them were to leave these walls."

Sakura nodded demurely as realization sunk in; the trust they were extending to her with handing over these files and placing her into a position of power within the organization was expected to be returned. Konan released her grip on the files as she turned her head towards the door.

"Sunni." Konan called out, her voice slightly raised.

"Yes, Konan-sama?" A muffled voice inquired from beyond the door from a presence that hadn't been there moments ago.

"You are to escort Sakura-san to the Medical bay once we are finished here."

"Understood." The feminine voice replied, peeking Sakura's interest. She was unaware that Akatsuki had any other female members, there had been no mention of such in any bingo book.

"There are some aspects of the ring you must be made aware of, Haruno-san." The conversation was back under Pein's control as he turned to sit behind his desk, lazy, hooded eyes focused on his latest recruit. Sakura nodded, eyes affixed to Pein once more.

But not in the eyes.

"The ring can never be taken off." Direct, to the point. "No matter what Jutsu you try, no matter if your soul moves body, if you cut off a hand or even temporarily die, it will always find its way back." Sakura's eyebrows pinched as she realized she had been marked for life.

"The only way to break the connection is through permanent death, as you can deduce." He was certainly leaving out a lot of information about the ring, but then Sakura could understand that. The less information she knew the harder it would be to break whatever seal had bound it to her.

"The rings allow us to communicate, though the members can only contact me. The communication is done through a justu known as Gentōshin no Jutsu, a type of astral projection I
can induce by locating and harnessing your shinenha, projecting it at a certain location. There is only one hand seal needed to activate it, Ram." Sakura nodded as she absorbed the information, her curiosity at such a technique growing with every word spoken; she had never heard of, let alone seen, such a technique.

"However to fully activate the jutsu you must be in a meditative state, projecting your thoughts so I may harness them. I shouldn't need to tell you this would leave you in a very vulnerable state, so you are only to activate your side of the jutsu while in a safe place." Sakura gave another nod, fully understanding all that he had told her. "There is more I could tell you on the subject, but it is not imperative at this time."

And with that, she was dismissed.

Konan turned towards the door to lead her out and Sakura followed, her mind ticking over the information she had just received. It was certainly a lot to take in and a lot more than what she had bargained for when signing up.

"Haruno-san." Sakura paused in her step, halfway through the door as Pein called to her. "There is no information on the Sharingan in those folders." Sakura grit her teeth as the door fell closed behind her.

Sakura didn't have much time to think on Pein's final, parting words as she caught the sight of their latest companion. Sadly, Sakura's heart sunk as she was brought face to face with a standard shinobi, no visible affiliation with Akatsuki shown upon her persons.

Although, the slashed hitai-ate across the forehead did bring some questions.

"Sakura-san, this is Sunni. She will escort you to the medical bay. If you have any other questions or need extra information, you know where I am." And with a sideways glance to Sunni to make sure she understood her orders, Konan slipped back into Pein office.

Sakura gave a nod as the woman bowed deeply to her and then took the opportunity to run her eyes quickly over her. She stood slightly taller than Sakura, but it was barely noticeable, maybe by about five centimetres. Her body type was extremely different to Sakura's, while Sakura was thick with muscle, the opposite girl was thick with fat, a chubby belly, thick, shapely thighs and a no doubt over zealous bust. Her hair was tied in a bun sitting atop her head, a string of spherical tiger's eyes stones wrapped around the base to secure it.

The glint of her glasses is what caught Sakura's eyes next, the rectangular, black frames doing well in framing the women's mid hue blue eyes. Chubby cherub cheeks splashed with freckles had Sakura slightly envious, as her fair skin did little in throwing the cute sunmarks.

She wore a soft green jounin vest matched with equally green pants, if not slightly dull. They looked roughly the same age, which put Sakura at a little more ease around her, though there was certainly something about the other woman that caught her attention.

"I don't recognise your symbol." Sakura mentioned casually as she tapped her own, blank and rather large forehead as the girl ascended from her deep bow. The symbol in question was quite plain, a single line curved softly, the top of which had three thinner lines spiking out from the tip on the underside.

"Ashigakure; Village hidden among the Reeds, Haruno-sama." Sunni responded. causing Sakura to raise a brow at the formal, respectful title, but she didn't press the issue.

"I haven't heard of Ashigakure before."
"Not many have. We're a small village, maybe a quarter of the size of Konoha with most being residents being civilians."

"You talk of your village like you're still affiliated." Sakura said off handedly, glancing around the hallways as she trailed after the woman leading the way. Sunni responded with a quick, demure smile.

"Because I am, Haruno-sama."

"What?" Slightly shocked, Sakura's head whipped around to stare at the back of Sunni's head. The woman looked back at her, an eyebrow raised as if she expected Sakura to know something.

"Ashigakure was much like Amegakure. Akatsuki helped usher in a new age of prosperity, placing Hiroaki-sama as the village leader, and such Ashigakure has cast off previous ties to the old way and done all it can to help Akatsuki in their goals." Sunni gave a cheeky wiggle of her nose as she turned to gaze back at Sakura, an odd sparkle in her eye.

"Though, we hide such a tie very well." Sakura simply nodded, speechless that the Akatsuki had staged not one, but two successful uprisings in small villages with none of the other villages notice; such a power was exceedingly dangerous.

"Unbelievable." Sakura whispered under her breath.

"Yep." Was all Sunni could offer in support.

"So why are you here then?"

"A show of faith to Akatsuki. There are several other Ashi nin within Ame, but I mostly work as a delegate between the two villages. My Sensei wasn't happy about it, but if I'm not coddled up right beside him he never is." She turned to face Sakura, having lost a little of her apprehension in talking to her, obviously not viewing her as a strict, overbearing higher-up that had to be feared. It pleased Sakura, she had never been a fan of grovelling lackies.

"But man you should have seen my teammates, thought they were going to storm off and throttle Hiroaki-sama."

"They doubt your strength?" Sakura enquired in a soft, delicate voice, as if fearing the answer.

"Nah." Sunni responded with an indignant snort. "They just...worry." She responded with a head tilt and an eyebrow crease, obviously wondering if that had been the correct word choice.

"Anyway, we're here now Haruno-sama!" Sunni chirped, switching facial expressions in a swift moment as she briskly pushed open a door into what Sakura would guess is her new medical bay and office.

"Please, just Sakura." She murmured back, though her attention was immediately pulled to the inside of the room.

It was...sparse.

Sakura was glad she had the foresight to buy all those medical instruments and other assorted goodies. Dumping the thick stack of files on the surface of a bare, white desk she set about giving the medical bay a once over.

It was nothing revolutionary and if Sakura was honest, didn't even throw shade on the one she had while she was in Konoha. It was clean and sterile, in an obtuse, overpowering shade of white. She
had two patient beds on one side, a curtain separating the two that could easily be pulled around to completely enclose either of the beds for private checkups. On the other side of the room, where she stood next to, was the clean white desk with only a few sparse draws, a bookshelf to one side and a plain examination bed on the other.

Directly above her desk was another set of shelving, all in white with clear glass fronts. She could make out bottles of certain ingredients and medications, but not nearly enough for her to be pleased with.

Turning she gazed out the large, bay window that dominated the opposing side of the wall to the door, being greeted with a lovely view of a depressing, grey village.

With a sigh she looked at Sunni, only to see the other woman standing there expectantly.

"It'll do."

The first day had passed quickly and quietly with Sakura writing list after list of items and ingredients she would need, followed by an intensive deep clean to the entire room and of any instruments that had been left over from whoever had previously occupied the space. By the time she had rearranged everything the sun had descended and her stomach had been protesting. Once food had been acquired she had settled in for the night. Assuming a meditative pose upon her bed she begun storing chakra within her seal once more and before long she slipped into sleep.

Judging by Sunni's surprised, yet curious look when they met the next day at morning tea time, it had been an unexpected sight to see an eye catching purple diamond sitting within the midst of her forehead.

But then, when most people spotted her sporting a facial seal that had only been seen on the legendary Sannin Tsunade it tended to cause a bit of a stir.

Sakura had been more interested in the supplies Sunni had brought with her rather than explaining to her what the seal meant and why she had it.

The rest of the morning had been spent finding homes for all of her new equipment, even though it had been more outdated versions of things she was used to; they had obviously been acquired from the local hospital and Sakura hoped she hadn't left them short.

The rest of the day had been more laborious than she would have hoped, sweating over different recipes she had mentally catalogued -because they weren't available on any market; she'd personally made them- was more time consuming than she had hoped.

Sakura had been used to having assistants doing this kind of menial labour, but now she was back to grinding herbs by hand.

Sunni never seemed to be too far away and Sakura had the feeling she was under silent orders from Konan to keep an eye on her, even if it was to simply fetch her food and water when she required it. Sakura wasn't adverse to the company and she had to wonder if that was also Konan's doing; it had been far too long since she'd had companionship and Sunni seemed to be doing a wonderful job of breaking Sakura in again.

Gruelling over medicine was often a time for introspective thoughts, but that tended to lead to depressing, downtrodden memories these days, so Sunni was doing an admirable job of bringing out a lighter side to Sakura, a jovial laugh or a scandalous expression from a racy story keeping
her mood light.

Sunni was very open and friendly by the end of the day, something that was odd from a kunoichi.

Kunoichi generally ran the gauntlet in terms of being recognized for their strength and more often than not, had a chip on their shoulder from trying to prove it. Fellow kunoichi could be cut throat in a world where they thought they were up against each other, as if there only existed so many positions for elite women within the world and they had to step on every other one to get to it.

Sakura had never truly believed in a world like that, and she had been lucky to surround herself with similar thinking women who strove to support and better each other, but that didn't mean Sakura hadn't run into women seeking to take her down a peg or two simply because of the position she held.

By the time the sun had set on the second night, Sakura realized that she hadn't see any other Akatsuki members in the two days she had been there. While she had expected it, she was almost a bit surprised to see that no one had popped in. She had at least expected to see Sasori around, seeing as how he liked to keep tabs on her, or even Deidara to come collect like he had promised. It had Sakura wondering if they had been sent out on another mission.

But then again, it wasn't like she had spent any length of time outside of the medical bay, she didn't even know if the other members were aware of its location.

The third day started, Sakura was prepared and free to do anything she pleased, but she still found herself drifting naturally towards the medical bay she had spent the better part of her 'weekend' preparing.

With a sigh and another bored, disinterested flick of the page Sakura busied herself with the file of one Hoshigaki Kisame. Like usual, there was little to no information on the man that she couldn't have gleaned from any bingo-book. Height, weight and age were about the only things recorded; nothing about his unusual skin or teeth, about previous injuries or current medications. Blank, if not for a few notes about stitches from a couple years ago.

This had been a recurring theme with all of the files, not a single useful note or documentation of serious injury or illness.

Sakura's eyes flicked over to the file that seemed to reside to the left, the medical folder of one Iwa no Deidara. It had been the thickest of the lot and seemingly jammed full of goodies Sakura would love to read over, but sadly it had been underwhelming.

While it certainly seemed like Deidara was one to get himself into dangerous situation and then suffer for it, it was nothing that she hadn't seen from other shinobi of his rank. The most common injuries he seemed to sustain seemed to be broken bones and burns, none of which, if Sakura could remember the vivid imagine of his body, had left severe scarring.

It seemed that Amegakure had at least one adept healer in their midst.

Giving another large huff, Sakura blew a section of her bangs out of her face, slamming Kisame's folder shut in annoyance.

"Is the stale air getting to you, Sakura-san?" Konan's soft, understated voice filtered through the doorway as she strode through confidently, her intense amber eyes sticking to Sakura like glue.

"Ah, Konan-sama." Sakura chirped, throwing down the pencil she had been absentmindedly toying with and stood to attention. Konan managed to wave her off before she dropped into the
routine kneeling position and Sakura was slightly thankful for it, her back was stiff from the long hours sitting in a seat.

"It's just the files." Sakura wearily replied to the original question, resting a hand on the top of her chair as she leant her weight on it.

"Is there a problem?" Konan replied, cocking an eyebrow as she finished looking over the room, interested in the obvious changes Sakura had made.

"No, no." Sakura quickly reassured her superior, waving her spare hand in front of her in a negative motion. "they're simply...lacking." Her wording seemed to pull Konan's attention as the older woman turned to face her, silently encouraging Sakura to continue.

"How often do they sustain injuries?" Sakura worded her question carefully, not wishing to insult Konan or the organization.

"Rarely." Sakura nodded.

"Do they seek medical attention for these injuries?"

A pause.

"I am unaware." The tone of Konan's voice let her know that would not be the case from now on. "What have you read in their folders?" Konan asked, striding over to stand beside Sakura as the pink haired woman spread some open folders out for Konan to review.

"Nothing much, and that's the problem." Sakura flicked through a few pages of Kakuzu's folder, only to be greeted with pages of information on the bodies he had brought back to Ame.

"When was the last time they even had a general check-up? I recommend a yearly check-up but I haven't seen any notes to having had one for years." Konan simply shook her head, obviously aware at how they had seemingly missed a glaring hole in their organization until now.

"What about STD checks? They should be receiving them quarterly." Sakura asked casually before she looked up at Konan, only to be met with a blank slate as all emotion fell from the blue haired woman's face.

"Ah." Sakura's eyebrows pinched. "You are aware that STD's are one of the biggest killers of shinobi, are you not?"

No response.

"Male shinobi are well documented to sleep with prostitutes as well as local men and women while on missions, they tend not to use safe sex methods including using condoms or enquiring about previous sexual partners, let alone ask their partner if they have any STD'S. Regardless of rank. I assume this is the same for missing ninja as well." Sakura rambled off as she set about stacking the files of her fellow members and placing them away behind an intricate seal.

"A full screening would be best, along with a general check-up."

"Would you like me to send up what members we currently have, Sakura-san?" Sakura stopped in place before her eyes met Konan's.

"Sadly, I do not have the facilities nor instruments to be able to do an STD check, though I can easily do a check-up. However…" She rambled off again as she turned to Konan, a finger absentmindedly tapping at her cheek as she thought over what ramifications such a meeting could
have. While seeing the other members naked was not even a point at which she would pause, shinobi at their rank were more often than not, wary about who they let touch their body intimately, let alone learn what secrets their bodies tried to hide.

"I don't think there is an established level of trust between the other members and myself." She gave a nod, mostly to herself. "If I am to be their GP they need to trust me to a certain extent, I'll need questions answered fully, not half truths or flat out lies."

"I see." Konan's responded, her painted eyelids heavy as she contemplated her newest members dilemma.

"They shall report to Amegakure's hospital facilities for their general check-ups and for an STD screening, files shall be forwarded to you and if you need any notes elaborated on you can enquire with the men directly." The way she punctuated every letter in the acronym for sexually transmitted disease made Sakura think she wasn't as comfortable with the idea as Sakura was.

Nodding, Sakura agreed to the compromise, but Konan had already made her move to leave. Following Konan to the door, she gave a soft bow as the blue haired woman stalked down the hallway with purpose in her step. Sakura blinked at the almost disrespectful brush off Konan had given her, not even offering a farewell.

But the snickering Sunni pressed up against the wall beside her door biting her knuckle to try to stifle her amusement was more interesting.

"I think you ruffled the great angel, Sakura-sama."

Sakura simply raised a fine, pink brow before disappearing back into the medical bay, but it seems she wouldn't be escaping the Ashi nin that easily. Sunni followed her in, arms folded over her restricted bust.

"I don't think Konan-sama is used to having such things said so casually." Sunni expanded upon her previous comment. The idea of Konan being put off by such talk was mildly amusing for Sakura who had said and done much worse than that before.

"Is it the medical or sexual aspect?" She asked Sunni for her input on the matter, hoping she hadn't offended or upset Konan.

"My guess would be sexual."

"I have a feeling your guess would always be sexual." Sakura cut Sunni a dry, wilted look. Though they had only spent a small amount of time together, Sakura's pervy-detector, a secret ability that had been honed through years of interaction with legendary perverts, had been hitting all time highs.

Suni shrugged, though did little to suppress her grin. "I am my Sensei's student."

"I hope I didn't offend her." Sakura changed the subject fluidly.

"I think Konan-sama is harder to offend than that, but.." It seems Sunni didn't want to further that conversation as her eyes grew dim, she obviously had thoughts regarding the subject but didn't want to share them. Sakura could understand, Konan was a superior and if Sunni was heard gossiping or spreading rumors things could certainly end badly for her.

Deciding not to push the subject, Sakura glanced around the room, suddenly finding herself without anything to do. Puffing out her cheeks in a slightly immature display of 'Oh god now I'm bored' she turned back to Sunni.
"Was there anything you needed me for?" It had been unusual to find the woman simply standing out there, she tended to stay hidden until Sakura called for her.

"Ah." Sunni had obviously forgotten why she had been sent there in the first place, but it must have been unimportant if a nin of her standing had been so casual this entire time. "Deidara-sama has blown his hand off and we require your assistance in the training grounds to administer first-aid."

Chapter End Notes

Notes:

Gentōshin no Jutsu - Magic Lantern Body Technique, this is the jutsu Pein uses to call all the Akatsuki together, you see them as basic shadows.

Shinenha - "Thought waves"

Ashigakure - Completely made up village, Ashi meaning "Reeds." If you'd like to see a depiction of the symbol check out my profile for a link!

Sunni - Is an OC of mine that I've had around for a stupidly long time! She wont be a massive part of this story but will pop up whenever Sakura is within Ame.
Speculative Thoughts

Chapter Summary

Her light destroyed, Sakura now finds herself on a path she never thought she'd take, that of a missing-nin. Rumors of her status are spreading, and one organization has taken notice. Redemption is offered, will it be taken? Will the light of her life be replaced with a catastrophic boom?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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Recap

"Was there anything you needed me for?" It had been unusual to find the woman simply standing out there, she tended to stay hidden until Sakura called for her.

"Ah." Sunni had obviously forgotten why she had been sent there in the first place, but it must have been unimportant if a nin of her standing had been so casual this entire time. "Deidara-sama has blown his hand off and we require your assistance in the training grounds to administer first-aid."

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Speculative Thoughts

Chapter twelve

Sakura flew into a flurry of movement as she whipped around the room grabbing various items as well as a large first aid kit. She shot Sunni a furious look as she stormed from the room and begun to descend through the building as quickly as possible, though it wasn't until she was two stories down from her original position that she turned on Sunni.

"Lead, now." Sakura had no clue where she was going and was simply wasting time out of anger.

Sunni took the lead with no problem and kept up Sakura's quick pace as they dashed through the halls. It was at this moment in time that Sakura was pleased the Akatsuki's main building was exceptionally quiet and understaffed, it left the dark hallways clear of any obstruction.

"What the fuck happened?" Sakura felt it would be good to learn what any information Sunni had previously left out before they arrived. "And why the hell didn't you say anything sooner?"

"We don't know. Everything was fine and then there was an explosion, which is pretty normal for when Deidara-sama is practicing, but this time there was a scream. I was one of the first few on the scene, along with Junji-san, a medic. He took to Deidara-sama's care by applying pressure, I decided to report to you asap." She threw Sakura a look over her shoulder as they burst out the concealed door and off down an alleyway, Sakura was pleased to find that there was no rain today.

"I didn't get a good look as Junji had it covered, but my guess is with all the blood he's fucked up
his hand. He was swearing like nobody's business, must of hurt like a bitch." Sakura hadn't missed the way Sunni had left out why it took her so long to tell her, but maybe Sakura had overreacted a bit and Sunni had only arrived in time to hear the tale end of her conversation with Konan, the delay may have only been as small as thirty seconds.

But Sakura had seen people die in less.

With a furious sprint down one of the streets at the back of building, Sakura found herself weaving down a small alleyway before bursting out into a large, uncovered training area. It was as bleak and grey as every other part of the city, though it did seem to incorporate large swaths of native floral and natural elements like trees, rocks and waterways. They weren't too far from the building, maybe a minute by walking, and Sakura was pissed she hadn't let Sunni lead sooner as they simply could have descended from Sakura's window.

Not faltering in her step at all, she continued her dead set pace as she sprinted towards the group of four or so nin huddled around her soon to be patient.

"Move." It was a commanding tone, leaving no room for back chat and Sakura was surprised to hear it coming from Sunni. Sakura was glad to see its effect as the group dispersed slightly, revealing Deidara prone on the ground and a younger man kneeling at his side. Falling to her knees she felt herself skid slightly, bringing herself a bit closer to Deidara than what she had intended, dropping her first aid kit she immediately begun assessing the damage.

'A lot of blood.' Her eyes flicked over the surrounding ground to see the blood splatter originating from a smashed boulder, a large hunk taken off from the front, leaving the rest to cave in on itself. Looking back to Deidara she could see his pale face contorted in pain, flecks of blood having splattered up his arm and torso to paint his features and mat in his hair.

Looking down on the hand she was met by a pair of large, masculine hands holding a swathe of soaked gauze to Deidara's profusely bleeding right hand.

"Move." Sakura motioned the man to move his hands away, when he didn't comply she looked up to establish eye contact. He was around the same age as her, a slashed Ame hitai-ate tied around his forehead and seemingly wearing the same, plain grey uniform all the Ame medical staff seemed to wear. Sakura could read the uncertainty in his eyes, obviously not knowing if he should follow her orders or not. At any other time Sakura would no doubt have agreed with him to keep the pressure until they could get him to a better facility for treatment, but this was a very unusual patient and she had a desire to see his hand before making any snap judgements about treatment.

"Move your fucking hands before I snap them off." Sakura's legendary temper was rising with every second some low rank medical serf disobeyed her orders, having never faced such disrespect from her previous medical staff. He waivered, yet complied in the end, removing the gauze blocking her assessment.

'That's a shit show.' Was Sakura's first thought as she witnessed the destruction Deidara had inflicted on himself. While she could make out all of his digits, that was about it, the skin had been rendered useless and had seemingly disappeared all together, save for a few scraps that fell limply from the wrist. Bones, tendons and muscle were all visible, but for what Sakura could identify, where not in the correct place or even attached to other things. The muscle seemed to be pulverized, tendons snapped and bones fractured and displaced.

And that was just the back of his hand.

Snapping through her the hand seals for her Shosen jutsu, a green haze of chakra encircled her hands. Sakura then placed them on both sides of Deidara's hand, letting her own chakra filter
through the devastation, it was only then Sakura knew the full extent to the injury.

"Zoketsugan, first layer on the left." It was an order to the medical-nin in front of her, and she was pleased to see him follow it without fault this time. *The blood increasing pill will stop him from bleeding out as I complete this assessment.* She reassured herself, giving herself more time for an in depth evaluation.

She was pleased to see his chakra pathways in his hand were intact, if not in a complete disarray and justifiably fried. They seemed to centre mainly around the huge gaping hole that stretched through his palm, and it was then Sakura realized some of the disfigurement she had taken for damage had simply been the unique anatomical makeup of Deidara's hands to facilitate the unusual cavity his kinjutsu required. Probing deeper she found a lumpy, fleshy mass that she decided had once been the tongue.

Veins had been ruptured, however, causing a significant bleed out that needed to be stemmed immediately, which Sakura set about doing. *Cauterize them for now, until I at least get him up to the medical bay, the hand should last without blood flow for six hours so I need to complete the majority of healing before then.* She mentally walked herself through the steps as she set about doing them, using her own chakra to stem the flow of blood to his hand before forcibly sealing the ruptured veins closed.

*The bones will need to be set and mended, muscles and tendons healed and reconnected, the skin will have to either be forcibly regrown or grafted from a different area. Worst comes to worst I have to find a skin donor, but for the most part...* Sakura turned her gaze back to Deidara's face, surprised to see the his lone blue eye staring back at her through a tiny parting in his lashes.

"It's fixable." She told him directly with a stern, serious look on her face. The connection lasted a brief second after she told him her prognosis before she turned on the medical nin who had been tending to him previously.

"Go to the medical bay, prepare for an emergency operation, start with Ox scroll. There is anesthetic in the top left shelving over the desk and syringes in the top left drawer of the desk. Prep two, ten mls. I shouldn't need to tell you the rest." She barked, expecting him to know what else she would need for this surgery. He complied without thought, breaking out into a sprint as he made his way back to the large building.

Casting off her cloak Sakura revealed the large scroll she had strapped to her back before coming down, with a tug of the binding keeping it there she let it fall to the ground. Destroying the wax seal keeping it closed, she threw it along the ground, letting it unravel as it rolled. With a few hand seals she slammed her palms down upon the basic seal that had been written upon the scroll, and within a second she was surrounded in a plume of smoke. As it cleared it revealed a standard stretcher, folded down to be level with the ground.

"Sunni." Sakura barked for the woman, hoping for her assistance as she made her way back to the faint, pale Deidara who was barely clinging to lucidity. He had lost far too much blood before she had arrived, but with the blood replenishing pill within his system, he would be recovering in no time.

"Otherside." Sakura motioned for the Ashi nin to get on the other side of Deidara as Sakura fell into a crouch before the other man, grasping his arm she threw it over her shoulder, reading to support him if he should fall. Seeing Sunni do the same, she turned her attention back to Deidara, the cold grey of his generally fiery denim eyes unsettling her.

"Deidara-kun," Sakura almost surprised herself with the use of that suffix "On the count of three I want you to stand up. We're going to walk you over to that stretcher and then you can lie down,
okay?” He responded in a positive fashion with a lazy, sleepy nod, but Sakura wasn’t too worried about that as she could finally see some colour coming back into his cheeks.

"One, two, three." And with a mighty heave Sakura and Sunni dragged Deidara to his feet, which was actually more difficult than Sakura had hoped. It seemed even with his approval he still didn’t quite have the strength to help with the standing portion of the plan, only seeming to have the strength to keep his feet under himself. It made it awkward for both Sakura and Sunni, as both of the girls were far shorter than Deidara.

Slowly they made their way to the stretcher, which luckily enough was only a few feet away. On top of that, it seemed that the remaining nin were useful enough to prepare the stretcher, pulling it up to its full height and positioning it so Deidara could easily flop on top of it. Grabbing Deidara feet she threw them onto the end of the bed so that he was ready for transport.

He still seemed to be holding his hand up, but Sakura knew it wouldn’t last for long, she could already see his resolve wavering as his arm twitched and swayed. Reaching for a sterile sheet she placed it on Deidara chest before taking a hold of his undamaged forearm. It seemed to jolt him out of whatever wavering plane of consciousness he was floating in as his lone visible eye snapped open and flicked to Sakura.

"Deidara-kun, you can put your arm down now." She spoke softly and calmly, hoping the strong headed blonde would listen to her, and she was relieved when he did. Sakura had to admit she hadn’t thought he’d be so compliant, she had expected him to be hard-headed, stubborn and one of those types that try to stay far, far away from medical personnel, but he had been taking direction well so far.

‘Probably the blood loss.’ She mused to herself as she placed his eviscerated hand on the sterile square sheet. Giving a look to Sunni, Sakura took hold of the bar along the side of the stretcher, pleased to see Sunni doing the same.

"Move quickly." And with that, they were off, pushing the stretcher as fast as they could without compromising the stability. As they wheeled through the alleyway, Sakura reached over with a hand to press her fingers against the side of Deidara's neck, checking his pulse while keeping an eye on his breathing.

Throwing open the door to the medical bay, Sakura was greeted with a pleasant sight. Junji had set up an operating bed, the armrest stretched out to the side with the Ox scroll Sakura had asked for spread out on the area where Deidara's hand would lie. Wasting no time she and Sunni bought Deidara’s stretcher up along side the table he would be transferred to.

"Other side." She commanded Junji as she grabbed a fist full of the sheet under Deidara's prone body, Sunni following her lead.

"On three again, we lift and move him on. One, two, three." And with a heave he was placed upon the new table, the movement jostling his hand and pulling a painful, semi-lucid groan from Deidara.

"Sunni," Sakura turned to look at the girl, taking a few moments to look her over. Sunni's chubby cheeks were flushed red, as was most of her face, sweat had beaded on her forehead and she could tell the girl was softly panting, even if she tried to hide it. Sakura had already guessed she wasn’t a physical fighter, so dragging Deidara's limp body as well as an incredibly heavy stretcher up multiple flights of stairs had physically taxed her. Sakura was pleased she hadn't voice a complaint.
"You're dismissed from this room, but please stand guard outside. If anyone is to ask you will fill them in but do not allow them to enter, this must be a sterile work environment. Junji-san will assist me." Sunni nodded, slinking out the door and closing it behind her.

Sakura quickly shed her cloak before reaching over to grab a disposable smock from a cabinet, slipping it on over her standard issue uniform. A pair of sterile latex gloves were snapped on next, followed by a surgical mask; this wasn't a field operation so Sakura was happy to take advantage of her new toys.

"Vitals." Sakura asked her latest assistance, having already checked to see him wearing the exact same outfit as her. Her eyes flicked over the instruments he had prepared earlier for her, all laid out neatly on a sterile sheet on a metal stand beside Deidara's mangled, outstretched hand. Walking closer to the prone blonde, she stood between his outstretched arm and his torso, facing up towards his head as she looked down on the hand.

"Steady." Sakura nodded, picking up a syringe that had been prefilled with a local anesthetic before ejecting the numbing fluid over the surface of Deidara's hand. The first syringe was used to liberally coat the outside of his mangled hand, the second was injected directly into torn tissue, a third followed before Sakura begun cleaning the wound of various loose bits of flesh and debris with a saline solution.

It was only once Sakura was happy with the prepped hand that she moved on to trying to repair the damage.

Reaching over to her repaired instrument, Sakura found her fingers wrapping around the cold, sterile loops of a pair of surgical scissors. Reaching over Deidara's limp, semi-conscious body she grasped at the strands of long, golden hair.

A swift snip and Sakura was now the proud owner of a lock of Deidara's hair

She spent a few seconds to wrap a thin thread around the bundle of hair to keep it from disbanding and making a mess before placing it within a small section of the seal Deidara's hand resided on.

"Medium is placed." Sakura told Junji, pleased once more to see him studiously taking note of the procedure so far. While his first impression had been severely lacking, he seemed to be making up for it in competency. "Moving forward with activation."

Slipping her hands into a simple, perfectly executed Ox seal, Sakura then placed both hands down on the two circles in front of her, feeling the seal activate and her medical chakra flow out from her body. The seal and the medium helped to stifle the flow of chakra to not overwhelm Deidara's system, the last thing Sakura needed was for Deidara to enter a comatose state on her operating table. The scroll was generally only used for long term surgeries, it certainly wouldn't be activated for anything less than two hours.

While it had certainly been an incredibly long time since Sakura had performed a procedure, let alone healed someone, she had not become rusty at all. It had all seemed to flow back into her like it had never left. The procedures to follow, the knowledge, the experiences, all of it had simply been waiting for her to reach out for it again.

Her eyebrows pinched as Deidara grunted, but Junji said nothing so Sakura continued pressing her chakra into the seal and through to his body.

'Not too much, but not too little either.' Sakura whispered to herself, concentrating on maintaining the correct balance between the two. 'If I don't use enough he'll lose nerve sensitivity in his hand, he'd be useless as any kind of ninja.'
There was a lot riding on the line for this operation and Sakura cursed at the fact that she was woefully unprepared with zero knowledge on how Deidara's physiology worked. She had no idea if she was helping or harming him by forcibly re-arranging bones and tendons in his hand to better match that of an average person.

The procedure was long and taxing, taking far too much of Sakura's concentration and chakra reserves. There had been times where Deidara had been lucid and questioning, but she'd let Junji deal with that, and there had been times she'd heard voices coming from beyond her door, but luckily Sunni had dealt with those and Sakura hadn't been disrupted.

At the end of the hours long procedure, Sakura found herself exhausted and physically drained. While the sun had once been up, it had set long ago and Sakura was left with nothing but darkness and the stinging fluorescent glow of her lights, but she was pleased.

"Bones are aligned, tendons mended, muscle will need more work but for the most part is repaired of tears. Tongue and teeth need more work but for now won't bleed." Sakura finally pulled back from Deidara, letting the last of the chakra within the seal dissipate as she ripped her gloves off, followed by her mask.

"Blood circulation has been returned." She added as an afterthought as she gazed down on the hand. It looked a lot better now, while at first it had appeared as a mashup of mincemeat, bones and tendons, it now resembled a human hand, save for the lack of skin.

"Deidara-sama is still in a deep sleep, is this normal?" Sakura nodded affirmative.

"My chakra is still circulating throughout his body, it will naturally filter out of his system and it's better for him if its done while he sleeps." Junji jotted down more notes, the same as he had done throughout the entire surgery.

"Two more operations will be needed, but your assistance will not be necessary." Sakura added, though slightly amused to see the way Junji deflated, he had a curious streak and had obviously enjoyed being under her command during the surgery.

"Of course, Haruno-sama." He bowed deeply, taking this as his time to be dismissed. "And may I just add it was a great honour working under you, you truly live up to the stories." Sakura's eyebrow cocked, but it hadn't been the first time she'd had such high praise.

"Thank you for your work, Junji-san."

With another bow, he ducked out of the room, though as he finished passing through the doorframe, some else immediately took his place coming in.

"Leader-sama." Sakura was surprised, not having expected Pein to be waiting for her to finish her procedure. She dropped into a crouch, head bowed, if she wavered slightly from the taxing surgery Pein didn't mention anything about it.

"I had intended to see you today to brief you on your next assignment." Sakura opened her mouth to apologize and point out the fact she had more pressing issues, but Pein continued before she could. "Though I see you had better things to be doing. Tell me what happened."

"I'm not sure." Sakura could feel his heavy gaze settle on her shoulders and it nearly made her grimace. It seemed Pein wasn't the type to be left uninformed.

"Suni reported to me to ask for first aid, I only know that this happened on the training grounds." Pein nodded and Sakura guessed that Sunni had been questioned before her.
"Is he stable for questioning?" Sakura paused, wondering which of her positions was more important. Pein demanded loyalty, and as such she knew she should wake Deidara, as it would not be life threatening, so that Pein could receive the answers to his question.

"No." However, above all else Sakura was a medical ninja, and her patient's well being trumped her desire to please her superiors. Pein nodded, taking her word for it.

"When he regains consciousness, I would like you to question him and then report to me. You are of course suspended from any other duties, including missions, until Deidara has healed enough to be deployed. I assume your facilities are enough to deal with the aftercare?" Sakura nodded and that seemed to be enough for him, as he turned and left. It was only when the door to the medical bay slid closed that Sakura felt she could wearily rise from her crouched position, though the stinging pain in her back let her know that wasn't a position she should be in after having performed an operation for hours on end.

Giving a sigh, Sakura rubbed at her temples, feeling the stress and exhaustion starting to compound behind her eyes. She flicked her gaze over to Deidara before giving another long, weary sigh. There had certainly been theories as to how Deidara may have gotten himself into the state he was in, but she wasn't about to speculate in front of Pein with unfounded ideas.

'But still,' Sakura thought, a whisper of concern seeping into her mental tone of voice. 'the injury is very similar, if not an extreme case of, chakra being built up into one area until it reaches breaking point; the 'it' in this case being the flesh.'

Sakura was intimately familiar with such an injury, having experienced mild cases of it during her apprenticeship with Tsunade.

'Why would Deidara have such an injury?' While it was true his unique ability did focus in his hands, she doubted it required this much chakra, on top of that Deidara was a high level nin who had been using this Kinjutsu for years, he'd be well aware of his limits. 'Perhaps he was creating a new technique?'

Or maybe she was overthinking it. With another sigh, Sakura resolved to get her answers in the morning. Making her way over to her desk, Sakura settled in for the night, knowing that after such a procedure she'd need someone to monitor the patient over night, and seeing as how Sakura didn't have a handful of assistants to do the job for her, she was stuck doing it herself.

With a slightly pained grimace, Sakura got stuck into the paper work, intending to beef up Deidara's lack lustre folder with a highly detailed report of her findings, including an in depth portion on his hands anatomy.

"What the fuck happened to my hair, yeah?!" Came the shrill yell that startled Sakura awake. Whipping her head around she was greeted to the sight of a frantic Deidara combing his good fingers through his hair and looking mournfully furious at the missing chunk.

"The fuck is this, yeah?!" Deidara bit out once more, although this time it was directed squarely at Sakura as she walked over to his side.

"Calm down, you'll ruin all my hard work." This hadn't been the first time Sakura had dealt with an irate patient.

"A section of your hair was needed for the operation to act as a medium between your chakra and mine. I would not have been able to heal you otherwise." She leant in closer, raising both of her eyebrows as she looked down upon Deidara on his bed.
"It was either that, or your hand." She finished, tapping the pen in her hand against the bandage covered fist. The tap against his hand seemed to bring him back some sense, as it sunk in that he had been pretty messed up when he was last fully conscious. His gaze dropped to his hand, his eyebrows pinching as he no doubt tried to flex and feel what was going on under all that bandaging. He probably shouldn't have done that, judging by the pained grimace.

He flopped back into bed, his upper body propped up at a gentle angle by the tilted head of the bed, a dejected pout on his lips as he gazed out the window into the early morning sun.

"If you'd like to know how your surgery went, it was a success, you'll require two more but your hand should be fine." He scoffed and Sakura couldn't help but feel incredibly offended at him blowing her off after she'd just insured he'd still able to be a shinobi.

"Do you have a *problem* with that?" Her tone had been biting, but it did well in pulling Deidara's attention away from the window and back to her.

"I'm sure Kakuzu could have just given me a new hand, yeah." He sounded like a spoiled brat and Sakura had the desire to pop him like one too.

"Yeah well Kakuzu's not here, so you're stuck with me, you brat." Annoyed with the thankless attitude Deidara was giving her, she turned to retrieve the clipboard that was residing on her desk, furiously scribbling notes down to avoid having to deal with the brat she now had as a patient. She missed the way Deidara's pout grew at the nickname.

The next few minutes dragged on in silence, filled only with the noise of pen on paper as both occupants of the room tried to ignore each other.

"Well, thanks, yeah." Sakura's head whipped up as she looked over her shoulder, her foggy jade eyes focusing on Deidara, only to see him steadfastly focused on something outside of her bay window. She could still see his pout in his profile.

She sighed, having always been a sucker for apologies.

Grasping at the back of her desk seat, she dragged it over to take a seat beside Deidara's bed which seemed to merit his attention, as he broke away from the window to look at her curiously.

"You know what I have to do now." Deidara face turned foul as he once again returned his attention to the window with an annoyed 'tch.'

"What happened?" Sakura's voice was bored and plain because she knew the likely hood of her actually getting anything out of Deidara was minimal. And she was right, as the question wasn't responded to at all, instead Deidara showed his contempt for such a thing by gritting his teeth and jutting out his jaw in a childish display. Sakura rolled her eyes in preparation of a lecture about insubordination and withholding pertinent medical information, but found her voice stifled by a demure knock on the door.

Arching an eyebrow, she glanced back over her shoulder to look towards the door.

"Food, Haruno-sama." Delicate, shy, female voice; distinctly *not* Sunni.

"Come in." The door was opened, a small food cart pushed in and a delicate waif of a woman followed. Brown hair, pale pink eyes, couldn't have been more than five foot one, looked like Sakura could see her ribs through her clothing and still *not* Sunni.
"Where is Hiro Sunni? She was the one assigned to me." Sakura asked blandly, not overly worried about her short time companion, merely curious to her whereabouts. The girl seemed startled at having been addressed, her down turned face jerking upwards and coral coloured eyes wide.

"A-ah, Hiro-sama was called away for, Haruno-sama." As she came beside Sakura, she offered a deep bow before walking several steps backwards. The girl was overly formal and a bit too polite for Sakura to be comfortable around her, so she simply dismissed her with a nod.

"She always creeps me out, yeah." Deidara seemed to be over his annoyance with her, but maybe it was just the prospect of food. "She's one of Zetsu's."

Sakura simply nodded and stored that information away for later. Reaching under Deidara's bed she grasped the small table used for patients meals, absentmindedly placing it over Deidara's thighs as she prepared his set up.

"Oh." His inflection was nearly as scandalous as his smile. "Do I get Nurse Sakura, yeah?"

Sakura felt a vein pop in her forehead as she contemplated dumping the bowl of okayu down Deidara's front.

"No, you have Doctor Haruno, who is in charge of you until she deems you fit for service." The plate was nearly slammed down on the table, but the tone in Sakura's voice spoke volumes. 'You're my bitch until I say so.'

But with a comment that would have bought about ire from other shinobi simply seemed to bring out the amusement in Deidara.

"I think I'd like that, Sakura-sensei." Sakura simply snorted before flopping down in her own seat beside his bed with her own bowl.

"Just Sakura is fine."

"Eh, you're ruining my fun, yeah."

"Just eat your food, Deidara-kun, you would have burned off most of your energy last night cycling out my excess chakra." She returned easily, used to being the killjoy when it came to patients in the hospital. Deidara seemed amused though, for whatever reason, a spark of light burning brilliantly in his lone denim eye that had been so pale and weak the day prior.

Sakura sat back in her chair as she bought a spoon full of okayu to her mouth, enjoying the warm feeling of the soft rice as it invoked feelings of home. She gave a pleasant sigh as she felt herself relax, taking another spoon full as she reminisced about the quiet mornings spent around the table, the dawn chorus starting up outside her house while she slowly enjoyed her coffee and meal. The mornings where she'd be sitting in little but a tank top and underwear, her head lolling back as the warmth from the okayu settled comfortably in her stomach as a pair of strong, masculine hands would sweep away her hair and-

"Ah, shit." Deidara hissed as the hot okayu spilled down his chin, throwing the bowl he had been manhandling with his left, non dominant hand down onto his small lap table. Sakura, thrown from her day dream sat up straight, grabbing a sterile cloth from a cabinet and handing it to the now annoyed patient. Looking down to her own breakfast with a sigh, she watched a few red beans swirl to the surface before she placed it back down on the food cart.

Taking a seat on the side of the bed, she grasped at Deidara's own bowl, which seemed to bring
his attention away from cursing at having made a tit of himself and back to her. Taking the not yet used spoon, she gave the okayu a small mix before offering the ladened spoon to Deidara. His eyebrow quirked just like Sakura's had done previously, and while it looked like he was about to shoot her down, he reconsidered, instead taking the time to indulge as Sakura slipped the spoon past his lips. She tugged back against the resistance his lips and teeth provided, sliding the spoon out as she watched him swallow the mouth full be had.

"I owe you this much." Sakura broke the silence as she lifted another spoon to his mouth which Deidara happily took. He didn't respond, but he certainly looked smug.

The rest of the day carried on in a lighter atmosphere, Deidara was quick witted and playful with the conversation and Sakura hadn't been dragged into such sharp back and forth since that time she'd been assigned to oversee Kakashi-sensei's stay in the hospital. His remarks were well placed, making Sakura feel annoyed enough to respond, but keeping the jabs humorous enough that she didn't find them offensive or even mean.

The second day carried on much like the first, except this day she permitted Deidara to be out of his bed, even if he wasn't allowed to leave the room yet. He had still had the high risk of getting infected and Sakura had preferred if he stayed within a sterile environment. She had of course permitted visitors if he was to have any, but no one had shown up. Deidara didn't seem to find this odd or out of place, but Sakura had at least expected Sasori.

She was glad he didn't show up.

Deidara of course, still refused to answer any of her questions pertaining to the incident that had gotten him into this mess in the first place, but Sakura had a way of getting around that. While it certainly hadn't been legal within Konoha, Sakura resolved that she was a missing-nin and loosening up the lips of another equally illegal fugitive wasn't entirely wrong or morally unethical, especially because she wasn't going out of her way to do this, nor would it leave Deidara with any ill effects.

The drug she'd be using to numb the pain in the next operation tended to make its users a bit loose lipped, so was it really so bad for her to abuse that?

Probably.

Chapter End Notes

Notes

Shosen jutsu - Mystical palm technique or Healing jutsu

Zoketsugan - Blood replenishing pill

Ox Scroll - Made up by me, but you see medical nin use similar things when operating. Basically it's a seal that helps regulate the amount of chakra you're using, because if you put too much chakra into someone else they'll end up in a coma.

While Sakura has excellent chakra control, this ox scroll is used because medical nin can become tired after expending so much time, energy and chakra into an operation and that results in lack of concentration. One slip up and too much chakra pushed in
could be deadly, so it's more of a precaution.

Can Sakura do this operation without the scroll? yes, undoubtedly. But Sakura is smart and she'd rather be safe than sorry.

Okayu - a rice porridge, often served in hospitals and to the ill, elderly and infants. It can have many fillings but I chose red beans for today.

A/N: Sakura returning the favour of the bread roll!

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