Out of the Darkness

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Summary

Sakura would show them she wasn't pathetic. One harsh word from Sasuke makes Sakura realize that he will never see her unless she is strong enough to stand at his side and not in his shadow.
Pathetic.

That was the only word he had said to her.

It was the only one he had needed to say. It was still ringing in her head.

His insult wasn’t unfounded either, unfortunately. The only thing Sakura had been able to do during the torturous three hour survival “mission” was fall for a rather obvious genjutsu, or what should have been a really simple illusion and a walk in the park to release, and faint upon seeing Sasuke talk while he had been buried in the ground up to his chin.

The pink haired kunoichi-in-training sighed, rolling onto her back to face the dull white ceiling of her bedroom.

She had contributed absolutely nothing to the survival exercise. The only advantage she had on Team 7 was her brains.

But what good was having knowledge without the skills to use it

On paper, Sakura was an excellent ninja. Written tests, no matter the subject matter, was the one area where she positively excelled, shining brighter than the rest of her classmates. She came out on top where her test scores were concerned, beating out even Sasuke; the rookie of the year.

She had listened to anything and everything Iruka-sensei had to teach them, her brain absorbing the information like a sponge, but lacked the necessary skills to apply her knowledge.

Both of her teammates had shown more skill than a normal fresh out of the academy gennin should be capable of, even Naruto who was dead last.

Sasuke had certainly surprised Kakashi-sensei with his above average taijutsu and his ability to produce viable fire jutsu. The dark haired boy had managed to get close enough to touch the bells they were supposed to be taking from their sensei.

Sakura knew that shadow clones were harder to create and maintain than regular clones because the user’s chakra was divided between the clones and the clones were solid. But that was exactly what Naruto had done. The so dubbed loser of the class had consecutively managed to make multiple solid shadow clones. It was a jutsu that required enormous amounts of chakra, way more than a gennin should have, so Naruto must have unnaturally large reserves in order to perform that jutsu more than once when he was only twelve.

She turned on her side as she began to inwardly examine her own skills.

She knew basic ninjutsu. She could create a simple bunshin, henge perfectly and effectively every time, and use the kawarimi technique. Nothing more than what was taught at the academy. Sakura thought she probably didn’t have the chakra reserves needed to perform most C-rank jutsus.

Sakura had a talent for genjutsu. Or so she had thought from the practical tests. After today she wasn’t so sure. She didn’t actually know any genjutsu, aside from the one that made people sleepy, but she was really good at realizing she was trapped in one, usually she was the first to notice, and dispelling it.

She shouldn’t have fallen for Kakashi-sensei’s earlier. The only reason she had was because it had
involved her crush, Sasuke, severely injured and asking for help (which should have made it obvious because he never asked for help), causing her to react instead of thinking logically.

Her taijutsu was rudimentary. It was good enough to scrape by the academy standards, barely. But Sakura knew it to be her greatest weakness. She had no stamina, strength, or speed to speak of. Any sparring at the academy was quickly and embarrassingly lost.

In reality, her skills as a ninja were nonexistent, and Sakura knew her quiet teammate and sensei were right. The rosette had absolutely no skill and cared more for her appearance and her crush on Sasuke than she did for her training.

And it showed. The gap between her and her teammates was cavernous. She honestly wasn’t sure if it was possible for her to bridge that gap and catch up to her teammates.

But Sakura couldn’t help it. The dark haired boy had come to her rescue once when she was being bullied for her unusual colored hair and abnormally large forehead, and she had vowed then that she would always stand by his side and offer him her support and whatever else he might need or want.

She knew his dream was to prove himself to his strict father. To step out of his older brother’s eclipsing shadow and be acknowledge. Sasuke had said so himself during his introduction on the rooftop.

Her display today had proven she was useless to him. How could she help him achieve his dream if she was weak? Her own dream was to make sure that Sasuke succeeded in proving his worth to his father, and from what she knew of the man, she knew impressing him was beyond difficult.

The obvious answer was to take training seriously. The only way to help Sasuke was to help herself. Currently she was only holding him back, dragging him down. She was a liability to him and his goals.

Satisfied with her plan, Sakura finally succumbed to sleep.

She needed to get stronger in order to help Sasuke, so that’s exactly what Sakura would do.

-GENNIN-

Sakura was dirty, bruised, and more exhausted than she had ever been in her life when she arrived at Team 7’s designated training grounds. She proceeded to studiously ignore both of her teammate’s questions and the looks they gave her in favor of resting against the third stump.

Given the fact that their sensei was exactly three hours late to both of the previous meetings, Sakura had reasoned that the pattern would continue and he would be late again today and every other time they would meet.

She decided that a surprise visit to Iruka-sensei was time better spent than watching the other two members of team seven fight while they waited, be it verbally or physically.

-GENNIN-

“Taijutsu?” the spikey haired chuunin questioned. Iruka Umino observed the young pink headed girl standing before him as she shifted her weight to the balls of her feet and leaned back slightly, smiling nervously.

“Hai, Iruka-sensei. I’m not very good at it, so I thought you might know someone I could ask for some pointers.”
That was certainly true. He knew that Sakura Haruno had struggled with taijutsu throughout all her years as an academy student, to the point that she almost had to redo one year. Iruka certainly wasn’t going to deny her and turn her away when she was seeking help to improve.

But he was curious as to her rather sudden change of heart. He knew the girl had the potential to be a shinobi, but lacked the drive. Sakura was rough and unpolished, but she loved learning new techniques and other things and she learned them quickly as well. Given the chance, he believed she had the ability to grow into a strong kunoichi that would be a credit to her village. But before now she had never seemed interested. Becoming a kunoichi only served the purpose of getting her close to Sasuke Uchiha.

Iruka decided that, as a teacher, it didn’t matter the reason for why the sudden willingness so much as the fact that Sakura was willing and prepared to actually become a true kunoichi for her sake. And not for Sasuke Uchiha. It would be remiss of him not to provide her the help she needed.

“Well, Gai Might is the taijutsu expert. He really knows what he’s doing, even if his methods are a bit unorthodox,” he said. Seeing that Gai’s questionable methods had not deterred her determination, Iruka informed her that Konoha’s self-proclaimed Green Beast could usually be found at Training Ground 13

Sakura’s face lit up with a bright smile and her eyes sparkled as she gave her former sensei a hug and dashed out of the classroom, throwing an “arigato” over her shoulder.

-GENNIN-

The pinkette ran all the way to Training Ground 13, anxious to speak with this legendary taijutsu master. She had slight doubts in the back of her mind that he would refuse to train her, thus destroying her dreams.

Once there she paused.

There was a man there dressed in a bright green full body spandex suit doing one handed push-ups. From what she could see, he had bowl cut thick black hair and a lean and muscular body, but not bulging awkward looking muscles.

She only approached him after he had finished, with an exclamation of 5000 that left Sakura in awe of him and envious of his stamina and upper body strength.


The spandex clad man leapt to his feet, striking a pose with one hand on his hip and the other giving her a thumbs up. He sported a grin larger than any she had seen on Naruto’s face. And it literally shone, practically blinded her.

“Indeed that would be me. Konoha’s Sexy Green Beast!” He wiggled his large slightly fuzzy looking eyebrows as Sakura tried not to react. “What can I do for you on this morning of eternal youth?”

Figuring it was too late to run screaming back to her own slightly eccentric sensei because of his weirdness, Sakura explained what she wanted.

“How youthful of you to want to improve your taijutsu Sakura-chan. Let us see what you are
made of!” Was he going to say youthful in every sentence?

Before Sakura had the chance to move Gai was attacking her, springing forward aiming a roundhouse kick at her head. Instinctively, she threw herself at the ground in order to keep him from detaching her head from her neck.

The petal haired girl made to get up, but was forced back into the ground by the knee planted firmly on her back and the kunai pressing gently against her throat.

Gai had said, “Well that won’t do at all, young blossom. You must make a more youthful effort and show me the skills of your youth,” pulled her to her feet and promptly disappeared.

Sakura spun around looking for him and was met with a strong punch to the gut, which had her stumbling back a couple steps. The jounin attacked again before she could regain her balance, send her flying forward with a well placed heel to her back.

She turned it into a hastily executed tumble and remained crouched low to the ground, spinning on one foot and lashing out with the other in hopes of knocking the taijutsu expert off his feet.

The man in green simply jumped over her leg, causing Sakura to scramble to put any distance between them. Not that that is really mattered at the speeds he could move but it made her feel safer.

She aimed a punch with her left hand, which he slid by, and tried to kick him with her right leg. Gai blocked it with his forearm, not even flinching. She thought it probably didn’t even hurt him. He gripped her leg and twisted it, throwing her over his shoulder where she landed on the ground with an “oomph” as the breath was knocked out of her.

Sakura laid on the earth, attempting to regain the breath she had lost. She had known she was terrible at taijutsu, but this one sided spar had just proved her wrong. Quite simply, she sucked at it.

-GENNIN-

Gai watched the young girl closely as she went through the training regime he had designed for her. It was pretty basic. 30 reps each of sit-ups, crunches, push-ups, pull-ups, and five laps around the training grounds. The warm up would set a foundation for her to build upon, slowly building up her muscle mass and stamina. Once her body adjusted to the routine he would add the first set of weights, moving slowly and increasing the number of push-ups, laps and such as she improved.

He wondered what caused her to seek him out. She had no taijutsu experience, and as a gennin it was her sensei’s responsibility to nurture her abilities and teach her the ways of a shinobi. So why come to him?

It would be different if Sakura wished to specialize in taijutsu, like his student Lee. But she obviously didn’t. All she wanted was to learn some new techniques and build up her stamina and speed. But why wasn’t she asking her own sensei for this training? So he asked her.

“Kakashi-sensei gave us a training exercise yesterday and I was useless. The only thing I was good for was my large forehead,” Sakura stated bitterly. “But he’s always late and he hasn’t taught us anything. He focusing more on our teamwork than our abilities.” She finished her explanation by saying she decided to use the time that she would be wasting to find someone who could train her in taijutsu.

Her sensei was his greatest rival. No wonder she came to him. Gai had won every challenge that
had dealt with taijutsu (and he was currently winning 76-74.) Of course she would want to be trained by the best.

Well, never let it be said that Gai turned down a challenge. He would train the youthful blossom in the ways of taijutsu, and if she had the brightly burning Will of Fire, he would have her at Lee’s level in four months.

-GENNIN-

Sakura was regretting her decision to come before Kakashi-sensei arrived, despite knowing to the dot exactly how late he would be.

It only gave her two teammates a half hour to interrogate her on where she had been, why she was late (SAKURA-CHAN, YOU’RE NEVER LATE!), what she had been doing to make it seem like she had eaten multiple servings of dirt, and just who did they have to beat up for daring to do this to their teammate.

She was so frustrated with the pair of them she almost cried in relief when their sensei finally appeared in a poof of smoke, (switching Naruto’s attention to him – “You’re LATE, Kakashi-sensei!”) with the excuse of babysitting his great-grandfather’s daughter-in-law’s son-in-law’s brother’s second wife’s nephew (which after weeks of thinking and the knowledge that her sensei had no cousins she realized it was him.)

The silver haired jounin didn’t react to Naruto calling him a liar or Sasuke glaring, besides to shrug unrepentantly. “Team 7 has its first mission today.”

“Really, Kakashi-sensei?” Naruto stopped yelling at Kakashi and started ranting. “I hope it’s something really cool. Like fighting bandits. Or guarding a princess. Or escorting someone really important. Or finding and revealing a spy. Or learning to be a samurai. Or . . .”

Sakura shut him up with a hard hit to the back of his head, telling him to stop yelling and let Kakashi-sensei explain.

“It’s much cooler than any of that,” the mask wearing jounin said.

Naruto’s eyes lit up in anticipation and Sasuke leaned forward, slightly interested himself.

Sakura thought she might have believed him.

If not for the strange glint in his visible eye.

-GENNIN-

The blonde sulked as he furiously scrubbed at the dish in his hands.

Sakura couldn’t blame him. She thought it was unbearably unfair to promise washing dishes to be the coolest mission they could do, but it was even more so because they were at Ichiraku’s.

When Naruto complained about cleaning ramen dishes (“There shouldn’t be anything left in the bowls. This is the food of the gods”) and not being allowed to eat any ramen while on the mission, Kakashi-sensei had said it was payback for the eraser.

After that Naruto got all gloomy and silent, mumbling under his breath. Although he did start washing at a much faster pace. She and Sasuke were hard pressed to keep up with him.

She was willing to admit to herself that she was surprised by both boys work ethic. With Naruto
being the loud, boisterous person he was and Sasuke with his ‘I’m an Uchiha. You are beneath me’ attitude, Sakura had been expecting to be forced to do all the work. If only because the both of them would complain that washing dishes was women’s work and therefore her responsibility.

But both boys were working studiously. Naruto scrubbed the dishes squeaky clean, Sasuke dried them to the point where they shined, and all she had to do was return them to their designated cupboards. If she was honest, Sakura was a little worried when she found out the details of their mission. Did either of her boys know how to wash dishes?

The answer was yes. And after a mental slap to her forehead, of course Naruto would know, Naruto was an orphan and had to take care of himself for twelve years. Sasuke knowing how to do dishes confused her. He came from a privileged clan, as he constantly liked to remind everyone he spoke to, so what possible reason could he have for knowing how to do common chores?

As much as Naruto hated this mission, Sakura loved it. It caused her to realize just how little she knew the other two gennin that had been placed in Team 7 with her and made her resolved to invite them over to her house in order to understand them more.

Maybe that way, Sakura thought, Naruto could feel what family was like and be a part of one and Sasuke would have a place to go if the pressure of his clan was ever too much for him. She knew her mother would smother them both with affection and make them feel like they belonged.

-KAKASHI-

Kakashi released them for the afternoon once the mission was complete. As soon as they had finished he had disappeared, supposedly to file the mission report.

Sakura was starting to see a pattern where their gravity defying silver haired sensei was concerned. Aside from his tendency to always be precisely three hours later than the specified time and having some bullshit excuse that is.

Any day they had a mission, he disappeared immediately afterwards, dismissing them until the next day, and the team would do no training whatsoever. She was peeved at him for running off instead of using the afternoon to actually train them. What times he did train them, he cared more for them working together as a team than teaching them new techniques and jutsus. She thought this was a gross error on his part. Not that teamwork was necessarily a bad skill to have, but it shouldn’t be his sole focus. He should be training them in areas that they excelled in, diversifying their skills so that they could function as a team, watching the others’ backs and making up for each other’s weaknesses.

Well, if Kakashi-sensei was going to be remiss in his teachings, then she would take advantage of the extra time away from Naruto and Sasuke to work on her self-improvement. Sakura was sure that Gai-sensei wouldn’t mind if she sought him out again to continue with her training.

She thought wryly, as she ambled in the direction of Training Ground 13, that he would probably think her youthful for her persistence and for coming back for more.

-KAKASHI-

Sakura hovered on the outskirts of Training Ground 13. Apparently, Gai Might was a jounin sensei, if the three gennin sparring were any indication.

They could probably sense her there, but she hovered on the edges observing them. This was obviously a team that had been together for a long period of time. Despite the fact that the spar looked to be a serious match, it appeared to be more of a choreographed dance. The three gennin
flowed as they switch effortlessly from attacking to defending. They clearly knew each other well enough to predict the others’ thoughts, actions and movements, and when an unexpected move was made they could adapt easily.

As the fight was called to a halt and Gai yelled for her to come and join them, Sakura wondered if her team would ever reach that level of comfort, to be able to effortlessly predict what their next move would be. Was this what Kakashi-sensei was trying to achieve? If so she would have to give him more credit.

Sakura surveyed each member as Gai introduced them.

Neji Hyuuga had long dark chocolate locks for a male that was bound towards the bottom. His pupil-less white eyes unnerved her. She felt like he could see through her straight to her soul. From what she had seen he was very good at taijutsu, which wasn’t much of a surprise considering he was on Gai’s team, but his style was very different from his sensei’s. She figured maybe it was the Hyuuga clan’s style. He was looking at her with a cold, calculating, emotionless mask on his face that reminded her of Sasuke and made her feel uneasy.

Tenten, the female member of Gai’s squad, had no last name, something that made Sakura curious. Her brown hair was put up in buns so it wouldn’t interfere with her visibility. The pinkette thought that was a smart idea and vowed to do something with her ridiculously long hair before it got her killed. During the spar she had used more weapons than the other two combined, and her aim with them was always perfect. Steel littered the ground, and it wasn’t just academy regulated kunai and shuriken. Sakura guessed the scrolls in her hip pouch were used to store all these weapons so they could be summoned when needed.

Gai’s last student made her take a second look just to make sure she wasn’t seeing doubles. But she was. Rock Lee was a mini-Gai from hair to his ninja outfit and down to his personality. He also focused on taijutsu during the spar exclusively; his style was also an exact copy of his sensei’s. Lee had not used any jutsu or even a kunai. He used the advantage he had in his speed. He had moved so fast that Sakura could hardly keep track of him. The Gai clone was clearly placed on Gai’s team because he specialized in taijutsu. Perhaps he wanted to be a taijutsu expert too. Later Sakura would learn that Lee could not mold chakra like everybody else and struggled with genjutsu and ninjutsu.

Gai bounded over to her, threw an arm around her shoulders, and dragged her over to his team. “This is the young blossom I was telling you about. Lee. Can you see the youthfulness that radiates off of her? It shines even brighter than it did this morning! I told you she would return!”

“I can Gai-sensei! She is a beacon of youthfulness!” Flames appeared in Lee’s eyes as he proclaimed just how youthful Sakura was.

Sakura had to grit her teeth before traitorous thoughts of abandoning her training went through her head. Her new sensei’s personality may not be one she liked, but she could get used to it, perhaps turn a blind eye to his more eccentric antics like she did with Kakashi-sensei.

She wouldn’t let her dream die because Gai was as abnormal as they came and he had a younger clone. Besides, maybe the enthusiasm that he put into everything he did would benefit her.

“I see you have returned, my youthful Sakura-chan! Was your training this morning not enough? Or did you realize that I am a much better sensei than my youthful rival Kakashi?” He was literally bouncing around her as he proclaimed very loudly every way in which he was a better sensei than her own.

Sakura wasn’t so sure any more about that coming back for the afternoon was a good idea. She
had not known he already had a team to teach, and she didn’t want to burden him by forcing him
to split his attention between her and his team. She also didn’t want his team to suffer because she
didn’t take training seriously while she was in the academy. It certainly wasn’t their fault she was
a terrible kunoichi and needed extra help.

“Well, Kakashi-sensei let us go early once our mission was over, so I thought I might as well see
if you were available and if we could continue. But I don’t want to burden you since you’re busy
with your team. I’ll just come back tomorrow morning.” Sakura made to leave.

Gai flashed in front of her. “Don’t leave yet blossom. Wanting to learn is never a bad thing. I shall
always encourage you to come find me when you have free time. How else are you going to
improve if you don’t come for training?” He winked as if they shared some secret, which she
guessed until she had showed up they had, and flashed her a grin.

“Well, as long as you don’t mind,” Sakura trailed off.

“Never, my youthful blossom!” Gai yelled “YOSH! Let us train. We shall start with 50 push-ups.
If you cannot do 50 push-ups then you will do 50 sit-ups. If you can’t do that you will have to do
20 laps. If . . .”

Sakura tuned Gai-sensei out as she weighed the pros and cons of coming to him for help. With a
sigh as she placed her palms on the ground and pushed her body up and lowered it back down,
she decided the benefits were worth the exhaustion she would feel when he was through with her.

Lee threw himself down beside her, promising to do ten times the amount she was or he would do
500 laps around Konoha on his hands.

Neji and Tenten returned to sparring. From what she could see, Neji was working on a technique
to repel physical attacks by emitting chakra.

With her focus completely devoted to counting, Sakura never noticed the cold appraising look the
Hyuuga gave her.

-SAKURA-

Sakura could feel the difference a week later. Without fail she showed up every morning for
training instead of waiting at Team 7’s bridge waiting for their chronically late sensei. And she
returned again in the afternoon when Kakashi-sensei released them from whatever mission or
training session they had that day.

She was still nowhere near Naruto’s or Sasuke’s level, but her stamina had definitely improved.
And she had muscles. She went home, weary and aching to the bone, and crawled into a warm,
relaxing bath every day. But the pain and fatigue didn’t matter.

What mattered was the fact that she was improving. If she could become physically stronger, she
could get stronger mentally as well. All she needed was to find someone who could teach her
genjutsu. But, aside from her sensei, who she was averse to asking for help, and the Uchihas, who
she knew would scoff and refuse to teach her, Sakura didn’t know anyone that was a strong
genjutsu user.

The rosette also worried about her training this afternoon. Team Gai had a mission that would last
a couple of days. That left her morning and afternoons completely open, because without Gai-
sensei there to supervise, all she could do was multiple repetitions designed to increase her stamina
and speed. And she was disappointed since she had really wanted to start learning new styles of
fighting like Gai-sensei had promised to teach her this week.
She would also miss Lee and Tenten. She had built a tentative friendship with the weapons mistress and one could not help but become friends with Lee. He was a lot like Naruto in that respect. Even Neji tolerated her. He seemed more approachable when they were having an intelligent conversation. Sakura actually found it disturbing that she got along so well with Neji, Tenten and Lee when she could hardly get along with her own team. Sasuke ignored her unless had to and she found Naruto so annoying sometimes.

She reached the bridge shortly before Kakashi would arrive, noticing that both her teammates were already there and wore looks on their faces indicating that they had been here for hours. Both of them insisted on showing up at the time Kakashi-sensei specified even though they knew he would never come on time.

As she watched them determinedly ignore the other, Sakura vowed to make more of an effort to make her team get along. Maybe now would be a good time to invite them to visit her house. She only hoped that getting together outside of missions and training would help them build closer bonds, otherwise Team 7 would fall apart because they couldn’t work together.

-GENNIN-

The pinkette was starting to wonder if Kakashi examined every possible D-rank mission the Hokage had to offer in hopes of finding the most inane and boring ones he could to annoy his team with as she returned scrolls to their correct shelves.

Team 7 was currently in the library. Their mission was to work as the librarian’s assistants. Sakura’s task was to return checked-in books and scrolls to the right place according to some crazy and confusing filing system, dusting the shelves as she went. Naruto was working behind the desk, it being the place where he could cause the least amount of damage or trouble. Sasuke sat behind the help desk. He was supposed to be helping with questions asked or directing a visitor in the direction of what he was looking for, but instead he was glowering at any that dared to approach him and ask for assistance.

She didn’t know who was happier when Kakashi-sensei said they could go, but she prayed that he didn’t find a job duller than that one. Sakura would be required to kill him if he did. She didn’t think she could take another mission of being a mediator between the two boys on her team.

-GENNIN-

Sakura knocked on the door of the apartment address she was given by Iruka-sensei, hoping that Kurenai Yuuhi had finished with her gennin team for the day. Kurenai Yuuhi fought primarily with genjutsu; she was so good at illusions that she could trick Uchihas and their Sharigans sometimes.

A tall woman with slightly wavy hair that curled at the ends answered the door. Sakura hoped, upon noticing the woman’s eyes were red, that red irises weren’t an indication of genjutsu ability, otherwise her genjutsu training was over before it could even begin.

The coral haired preteen was brought out of her musings by the older woman’s question. “Can I help you?”

“I hope so,” Sakura replied. “Iruka-sensei said I have really good chakra control and that was good for genjutsu types. I was hoping you could teach me some genjutsu. You are Yuuhi-san, right?”

The black haired woman confirmed that she was indeed Kurenai Yuuhi (“You can call me Kurenai-sensei from now on.”) and said if Sakura was serious about learning genjutsu they would
Sakura could admit it. She was beyond confused. Why on earth was Kurenai-sensei making her wear a blindfold? How could this possibly help her learn genjutsu? How could she tell if she was in an illusion if she could not see?

She felt a bolt of inspiration strike her, but was interrupted before she could ponder the idea.

“Alright, now. Before I teach you any genjutsu you need to learn how to recognize an illusion. And to do that you have to stop relying on sight and use your other senses as well, because most often ninja believe only what they are seeing.” Kurenai-sensei explained.

“Not that your eyes can’t spot something wrong with an illusion, I just don’t want you to fall into the same trap as most shinobi. Remember, just because something looks to be normal doesn’t mean it is,” her third sensei advised.

Sakura knew training in genjutsu would be tough. Any jutsu that affected the mind had to be difficult to cast, notice, and break. She just didn’t know how difficult. But training to realize the effects of a genjutsu was harder than she had imagined.

For the first two hours Kurenai-sensei put her through the paces, sharpening her all her senses. It was amazing how hard it was to train herself to notice a change in her surroundings with her senses other than her sight.

Sometimes the flaw in the illusion was so flagrantly obvious that she wonder if Kurenai-sensei wasn’t taking pity on her because she had no skills and she didn’t think Sakura was capable of noticing a simple genjutsu. How could she not notice the drastic change in weather or the moon replacing the sun in the sky?

Others, however, were so subtle that her sensei had to remove the genjutsu and point out the difference. These miniscule changes in the environment that went unnoticed never failed to make her feel embarrassed for being incapable at detecting genjutsu. A different scent of flowers not present in the clearing, a slight breeze that could have been real, she stumbled on the minor changes so many times that Sakura wonder if she really was supposed to have an affinity for genjutsu.

Kurenai-sensei let her go as the sun fell and their stomachs growled, reminding Sakura that her mom was making her favorite tonight, with the instructions to strengthen her senses with various exercises she recommended.

Sakura fell into bed that night mentally and physically exhausted. Even with her excellent memory, memorizing everything in a room and picturing in detail was hard. She was always forgetting a few things. But it was even harder to remember to add the scents and textures to the images.

Kami, genjutsu was just so complicated. At the rate she improved, she wouldn’t be ready to actually use genjutsu on a mission,

‘If that’s the case,’ Sakura thought determinedly, ‘I’ll just have to practice more.’

Sakura was glaring holes into the back of Naruto’s thick head. If she could shoot lasers out of her eyes, the blonde ramen loving idiot would be dead. It was his entire fault that they were in this
Team 7 was currently in the Torture and Interrogation Headquarters. Their mission was to repaint the interior of the building.

The three gennin were huddled in the middle of the hallway waiting for the paint to dry so they could apply a second coat. If it wasn’t bad enough that they were essentially sitting around waiting for paint to dry, they were doing so under the watchful eye of Ibiki Morino.

The guy gave Sakura the creeps. He towered over them at six foot three, dressed entirely in black, covered his head with a bandana, had two scars across his face, and fairly radiated creepy and scary and intimidating. She thought even Sasuke felt slightly uncomfortable in his presence.

Naruto, on the other hand, was just as happy and bubbly as ever, and Sakura seriously wondered if the blonde had any survival instincts.

Her immediate thought was no, because it was his lack of them that got them assigned this torture in the first place. God knows how he did it, but Naruto had somehow managed to spill his ramen all over their sensei’s precious Icha Icha book. She had witnessed it herself and still didn’t believe it.

But it had. And so here they were, twitching in the presence of a master interrogator waiting for paint to dry so they could finish and get the hell out of there.

“So,” he said, and all the members of Kakashi’s team nearly jumped out of their skin. His voice was smooth, yet gravelly, and exuded waves of sinister desire. No wonder the guy was head of the unit.

The strawberry haired preteen was nervous. What could a guy like him possibly want to ask them? What possible knowledge did they have that they could want?

“How did a team of misfits pass Hatake’s test?”

‘Misfits?’ Sakura rankled. They were misfits.

She wasn’t the only one to take offense. To her left, Sasuke had bristled and straightened his posture. To her right, Naruto had leapt to his feet, pointing an accusing finger in Morino’s face, screaming about how they weren’t misfits and how he was one to talk, before launching into the explanation of their gennin test.

Of course, Naruto was prone to dramatic exaggeration, which she and Sasuke corrected each time, and when Naruto had stated he had almost had a bell, Sasuke had called him a loser “You were nowhere near that bell, dobe,” and Naruto responded in kind, resulting in flying fists in the halls of Torture and Interrogation right under the eyes of its commander.

It was then the two of them knocked over the cans of paint.

Sakura could only watch in horror as the cans hit the ground and exploded, splashing dark blue paint everywhere.

Naruto and Sasuke had stopped moving the second they had hit the tower of paint cans. The two of them were drenched in paint, and quite a bit splattered on her as well.

She groaned at the thought of more work. Now they would be stuck in this god awful tower all day.
Sakura glanced at Ibiki Morino, taking note of the lack of dark blue paint on his person, and noticed the small sadistic smile he was wearing. The look in his eyes told her everything.

The man had already known exactly what happened during their bell test and had asked the question to deliberately provoke the hot headed blonde, because he knew how each of them would react and found it amusing.

Sakura thought, as she furiously scrubbed at the paint on the floor, she hoped to never see this man again, because his definition of fun terrified her.

-GENNIN-

“What happened to you?”

The question came surprisingly, not from Gai-sensei or Lee, but from Neji Hyuuga, who had never spoken to her during her previous training sessions with his team.

Sakura grumbled incoherently under her breath about idiots, paints, Kakashi, books, and ramen.

The Hyuuga just gave her a look that said to elucidate.

“Naruto spilled ramen on Kakashi-sensei’s book, so he got revenge by giving us a mission to repaint the Torture and Interrogation tower. And then Morino-san provoked Naruto and Sasuke into a fight and they hit the paint cans and the stupid mission took even longer.”

Neji, Gai, Lee, and Tenten, who had joined just as she was explaining, blinked at her.

“Hn.” The Hyuuga grunted.

Lee and Gai started yelling about how unyouthful Kakashi was for assigning that mission and her teammates for not behaving as expected and causing unnecessary trouble for their beautiful blossom.

Sakura was starting to think she should have skipped her afternoon training and gone home to take shower. And since when was she their blossom?

“Yosh. Let’s start, young blossom. Today we are going to test your reflexes.”

On a normal day and if any other person had said it, Sakura would not have thought anything was out of the ordinary. But, as it was such a terrible day and it was Gai-sensei who said it, Sakura felt a chill go down her back. Gai-sensei’s ideas were never normal.

“And to do this you are going to be blindfolded while my team attacks you!”

Sakura felt her jaw drop. He wanted her to defend herself blindfolded against the rookie team of the year from last year’s graduates.

Lee was jumping around screaming how it was such a cool idea, and surely Gai-sensei’s training would help Sakura-chan’s ability to dodge improve. Tenten looked anxious. How would the pink haired girl dodge weapons she couldn’t see? Sure, there were jounins capable of such a feat, but Sakura was a recently graduated gennin, and not a very skilled one at that. Neji finally looked something other than bored or annoyed. He actually seemed like he was interested in such an activity.

That hardened Sakura’s resolve. She would show that smug asshole that she was a kunoichi and could defend herself.
Sakura lay on the ground gasping for breath. Her only consolation was that Team Gai, aside from the sensei, was in the same condition as her.

Her first few tries were, admittedly, pathetic and totally deserved the scoffs the Hyuuga gave her.

However, in the past three weeks of working with their team, the rosette had grown use to their fighting styles and could predict their attacks to a certain extent. Her additional training in awareness of her surroundings with Kurenai had also helped.

The best thing, Sakura thought, besides completely shattering the Hyuuga’s illusions of her being pathetic, incapable and weak, was the fact that she could both feel and see the improvement in herself as the result of three weeks of serious training.

While still nowhere near Lee’s level, her stamina, speed and strength had improved to the point she could dodge most attacks directed her way and block the others.

She wondered if she could convince Kakashi-sensei to have a training session like this. It would be great for laughs and her ego. Her teammates were strong ninja, but she had a feeling they would fail miserably at this.

Gai watched with a proud look in his eye at the four gennin sprawled undignified, or as undignified as Neji could be, on the ground. Sakura had held up much better than he had anticipated at this point in her training.

Being naturally on the small side, she was quite hard to hit. It hadn’t helped his team that she was very flexible either. The pink haired girl had seemed to see a pattern in his team’s attacks and had used that to her advantage. She ducked, dodged, whirled, and weaved around and between them.

He was unbelievably proud of how far she had come in such a short amount of time. The Will of Fire burned brightly, ever present in the shine of her green eyes. He was glad he had taken the time to train her, because one day, the young blossom in front of him would bloom into a wonderful flower that would go on to do great and amazing things, and he had a hand in shaping her.

Gai only hoped that his rival would wake up and see the potential the Sakura had.

Sakura didn’t know about the other two, but she was getting sick of D-rank missions. She was positive Kakashi chose them specifically to torture them.

And she knew that was true when he revealed the details of the mission.

Catch Tora the cat and return her to her owner. The cat ran away so many times that doing this mission was a rite of inheritance. You couldn’t call yourself a gennin until you officially caught the cat. It was also a challenge to see who could get the fastest mission complete record. The fastest current time was five hours and thirty-six minutes.

All three of them complained about having to do this mission again. This was the fourth time Kakashi had signed them up for the Tora mission as it was dubbed by all gennin and their senseis.

“Tell you what, if you finish this mission up in less than five hours, I’ll show you something
new,” their sensei grinned.

Sakura looked at him dubiously.

“Do you promise, Kakashi-sensei?” Naruto asked unbelieving.

The silver haired jounin held up a hand. “Promise.”

Sakura relaxed at that. Lazy bastard her sensei may be, but the man had always kept any promise he made to his team.

She got to her feet, clenching her fist. She was determined to finish this mission as quickly as possible. From the other two’s stances, she knew they felt the same way.

Team Kakashi would knock this mission out of the park and learn whatever new thing their sensei had planned for them

--GENNIN--

Their plan was simple. Sakura, with the best chakra control, would send out her chakra to probe for the cat. Naruto would create two or three dozen clones to surround the cat and Sasuke, being the fastest member of their team, would dash in and snatch up the feline.

However, catching the cat was not that simple. The damned beast was fast and elusive, and despite being fatter than most cats could still slip through small spaces that they couldn’t.

All three of them were getting annoyed. They had no idea how much time had passed and they were being bested by a cat.

Surprisingly, Naruto came up with the idea to bait the cat with food. He had actually been thinking about ramen at the time, but Sakura had given him a slap to the back of the head and went off to procure a fish.

The blonde’s revised plan worked beautifully. Sakura had found the cat, and using the fish, had lured it into a dead end. Naruto clones that were waiting on the rooftops jumped down, blocking the cat’s escape. Sasuke leapt over rows of orange to snatch up the cornered cat.

The three exchanged proud and smug smiles as they stood in the Hokage’s office, Tora now safely, if you ignored the fact that he was being strangled, ensconced in his owner’s arms.

Kakashi stood behind them, smile hidden under his mask.

“Well, I guess I have to show you something new. Meet me at the bridge.” Then he disappeared in a poof of smoke.

He did promise after all. And they had shattered the record by catching Tora in two hours and seventeen minutes.

--GENNIN--

“You said you were going to show us something new Kakashi-sensei,” Naruto complained. “What are we supposed to do with these pieces of paper?”

“This is special chakra paper. Insert a bit of chakra and it will tell you your chakra nature. If it burns it’s fire, becomes damp it’s water, splits it’s wind, crumbles it’s earth, and crinkles it’s lightning.” He explained.
“So cool!” Naruto rushed to add chakra to his piece of paper. It split cleanly in two.

“So cool!” Naruto rushed to add chakra to his piece of paper. It split cleanly in two.

“You have wind nature chakra, Naruto. That’s good. There’s not many futon users in Konoha, so any enemy you face will not be expecting you to use wind jutsu.”

He turned to Sasuke whose paper had lit on fire and crinkled. “Well, the fire’s not surprising. Most of the Uchiha clan jutsu are based on fire. I wouldn’t have expected you to have a second one. There’s even fewer lightning users, but I can teach you some jutsu.”

Kakashi was visibly surprised by Sakura’s results. He had expected her to be one of those people who didn’t have a nature chakra nature given her ability for genjutsu. Most genjutsu users, aside from the Uchiha clan, could only perform genjutsu because they had trouble with elemental jutsu. He was going to focus on her genjutsu skills, maybe find some jutsu that weren’t elemental based to teach her.

But he hadn’t expected for her chakra paper to become wet and crumble.

Sakura was pleased with her results. She had two natures, which, combined with her genjutsu, would give her a wide range of jutsu. She was especially pleased with the earth ability, because doton jutsus could be used both offensively and defensively.

She would have to go to the library that afternoon to look for some scrolls on doton and suiton jutsus. She absentmindedly noted that between the three of them, the team was well rounded, having each of the chakra natures present.

-GENNIN-

Kakashi dismissed his team, only vaguely hearing Naruto complain about being the only one to possess just one nature.

When he had first received his team he had doubts as to whether or not they could pass his bell test. It was a difficult test that not even he had passed as a gennin, although Minato-sensei had made them gennin for the small attempt to work together and the skills shown.

He had been wary of the Uchiha. He had heard from Iruka how sullen and superior the boy was, and he knew that he had been obsessed with surpassing his brother. There was no way Sasuke would have, in the boy’s opinion, lowered himself to work with the other two gennin that had been placed on his team.

Kakashi had nothing against Naruto. He was his sensei’s son and he cared for the boy. But the blonde was loud, obnoxious, and dead last in the class. Despite the skills that Kakashi thought he should possess if he could prank the village and not get caught, he had failed the academy exam twice. He had been beyond shocked when the boy had produce shadow clones. It was not an easy technique to learn, and it was definitely not taught to gennin. Until he had talked to Iruka after the test, he had no clue that Naruto had managed to steal the forbidden scroll from the Hokage tower and learn the jutsu in two measly hours.

Sakura was the one he worried about the most. From the file he was given on her, she was a fangirl. A paper ninja. She knew the theory of being a ninja, but didn’t have to skills to be a proper one. If she passed, the best she could hope for was a desk job or teaching the next generation. All her focus went into stalking her precious Sasuke-kun, which he noticed she had not called him since their first day as a team, and not to her training. Kakashi had been utterly disappointed in her during the bell test. He had expected her to realize she was in a genjutsu and escape it, but she had succumbed to it instead.
But now he had noticed a drastic improvement. And he couldn’t help but wonder where it had come from. She had completely stopped squealing at Sasuke and trained without complaint, which not even the other two did. She was performing better in spars, keeping pace with the other two, dodging more often and effectively, even getting in hits of her own.

And now she had earth and water jutsu. Kakashi honestly thought Sakura’s only skills would be in her unnatural intelligence, almost on par with a Nara, and her genjutsu.

But he was also glad that it was not true. With her current work ethic, intelligence, gen, suiton, and doton jutsu, she had the makings of a great kunoichi.

He watched Team 7 separate in the distance.

Perhaps, his team could become as great as the legendary sannin. The potential was certainly there, waiting to be nurtured. All Kakashi had to do was guide them and help them learn and grow.

The jounin could do that.

‘The Hokage was right,’ he wryly thought as he strolled through the village with his hands in his pockets. Taking on a team wasn’t going to be a chore, and he was actually enjoying it.

-GENNIN-

Sakura had picked up few basic earth and water scrolls from the library on her way home. She knew element based jutsu were difficult to learn, and if she ever wanted to master her two natures, she would have to start practicing now.

Any spare moment she had between early morning training with Gai-sensei, then Kakashi-sensei, Gai again, Kurenai-sensei and missions would be spent study these scrolls and practicing new jutsus.

She knew from Naruto, the ability to make clones was a useful one. If she could make water, rock or mud clones they could be of great help to her. Having an affinity to an element meant she used less chakra when using suiton or doton jutsus, so if she could make water or mud clones, she would be able to fight better and conserve chakra.

She wondered if it was possible to build up her chakra stores like she did with her muscles and stamina. Compared to Naruto and Sasuke, she had very little chakra. The two of them were chakra powerhouses. She didn’t feel much accomplishment in the fact that her control meant she wasted less chakra per jutsu than they did. They had so much chakra available to them that they didn’t need to worry about having perfect or even great control over it.

Sakura brought herself out of her musings and focused on her scrolls. At the present, her time was stretched too thin, she couldn’t afford to find jounin that could use water or earth style. Spreading herself out amongst five different teachers would only be detrimental to her health and her improvement as a kunoichi. It would do her no good to take on too much and land herself in the hospital from over exhaustion. She would have to learn what she could on her own.

“Doton: Shinjuu Zanshu,” she read. The description sounded like what she had seen her sensei use on Sasuke. Maybe she would learn this one first and surprise her team by trapping Sasuke in the ground again.

-GENNIN-

Before Sakura knew it, days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. She had been a gennin
for three months now and she was surprised at how much she had learned in that amount of time.

She had mastered the Headhunter jutsu that Kakashi-sensei had used on Sasuke, and had used it to
great effect, Naruto’s hysterics, Kakashi’s surprise and Sasuke’s annoyance during a spar a few
weeks ago.

-SAKURA-

Sakura panted lightly, taking the opportunity to hide herself and catch her breath when Sasuke
turned his attention to Naruto. In the eight weeks since she had graduated, she had improved in
leaps and bounds, reaching the point where Sasuke had to keep an eye on her. It wasn’t the kind
of attention she was hoping to receive from him, but at least he was being forced to look at her,
even if it was only to defend himself in a mock spar.

Eventually she would show him she was worthy of him and he would come to truly see her.

But Sasuke’s attention to her wasn’t the problem at the moment. Or at least not in that way.
Unfortunately, his keeping a close eye on him was making it impossible to catch him off guard
with the new jutsu she had learned from the earth scroll.

She had worked so hard on it. She desperately wanted to see her team’s reactions to her getting
one over on the rookie of the year by trapping him mostly underground.

But in order to do so she needed a good distraction. There was no way she could cast the jutsu if
the Uchiha was watching her like a hawk. The minute he saw her weaving hand signs he would
make her defend herself, forcing herself to use her hands so she couldn’t make hand signs.

However, she couldn’t use it while he was preoccupied with Naruto because there was a greater
chance of Naruto, with his dozens of clones, getting caught in it instead. And if that happened, she
would lose the element of surprise.

She wasn’t skilled enough to beat Sasuke one on one. Sakura could only hope to catch him off
guard.

She turned over multiple plans in her head. She figured her best chance was to aim for the ground
behind him while appearing to be attacking him. Maybe she could attack him in a way so that he
would throw her to the ground.

It was a risky plan. It depended on if she was lucky enough to be left to her own devices
afterwards, which would only happen if she and Naruto attacked simultaneously.

But it was her best plan at the moment, so she would have to go with it and hope to high heaven
that Naruto attacked him after she did.

Sakura made two mud clones, another jutsu she had learned out of the scroll, and charged out of
the bushes.

Sasuke easily blocked the attacks from her clones and dispersed them. He caught her punch and
returned one of his own that sent her flying a few feet.

Naruto engaged Sasuke in a flurry of hand to hand combat. Sakura took the chance to form her
hand signs, and the moment the black haired boy had sent Naruto crashing to the ground with a
kick she slammed her hands on the earth and yelled. “Doton: Shinjuu Zansh!”

The look on Sasuke’s face was comical as he found himself trapped in the ground except for his
head again.
Naruto completely forgot they were fighting a free for all, every ninja for themselves battle and promptly crushed her in a hug. He was yelling about how she had totally showed that teme and how did it feel to lose to a girl. The girl comment hurt her, but she didn’t let it show. She hoped he meant by her because she was the weakest on the team and not the female gender in general.

Sasuke was quite angry with her, if the glare he sported was anything to go by. Only, Sakura didn’t know if it was because he had lost to her, or because he had lost to her because she had used that jutsu, or because he was trapped in that jutsu for a second time.

The best part was when Kakashi-sensei congratulated her and ruffled her hair. It was something she hated her mother doing, but it felt right when her sensei did it. He had said he was proud of her. Proud of how she had grown as a kunoichi.

-GENNIN-

She was quite glad when Naruto finally caved and demanded the Hokage give them a mission that wasn’t D-rank. Kakashi-sensei had stayed true to picking the most mundane and torturous jobs he could find. She felt they were ready for something a little more difficult.

Sakura listened with one ear as Iruka-sensei reprimanded the blonde asking for missions he wasn’t ready for and explained how the missions were classified and assigned. She focused again when the Hokage agreed to assign Team 7 to a C-rank mission.

This was just what she needed. A mission out of the village where she would have the chance to truly show off everything she had learned in the last three months.

-GENNIN-

She wished she was as pleased with the client as she was with the mission. When Kakashi-sensei had told them it was an escort mission, Sakura had gotten excited. A C-rank escort mission meant some trouble along the road, mostly likely bandits and thieves.

None of Team 7 had expected to be protecting a bridge builder. A drunk one at that who insulted them and didn’t believe them capable of performing their duty and protecting him.

Tazuna, the master bridge builder from the Land of Waves, was a drunk, slightly miserly, grouchy old man that disliked everyone but Kakashi and kept insulting ninjas.

Sakura had to repress the urge to strangle him every time he said something along the lines of a girl being a shinobi and how she should just quit and find a man to settle down with. Just because she was female didn’t mean she wasn’t or couldn’t be a ninja.

She wasn’t the only one. The old man easily got under Naruto’s skin, and Kakashi had to remind him multiple times that one did not attack the client they were hired to protect. She could even see Sasuke bristle sometimes.

Splash.

Sakura glanced down at the puddle she had just walked in. It hadn’t rained in Konoha for days. When she removed her foot it came away dry, and the surface of the water didn’t ripple. So it was a genjutsu, and a poorly cast one at that.

She looked behind her at Kakashi-sensei, but he just shook his head slightly, a signal to stay quiet and let him handle it.
Two ninja with a scratch through their headbands rose from the water behind the jounin. Before anyone could react, Kakashi had been wrapped in chains. The two ninja pulled tightly and Kakashi-sensei was torn to pieces.

Sakura watched horrified as the two ninja advanced towards Tazuna. She pulled out a kunai from the weapons pouch on her hip, unsure if she could defend herself and the bridge builder from the men who had killed her sensei. That was when she noticed the pieces of log on the ground.

Inwardly, she let out a sigh of relief. Kakashi-sensei wasn’t dead, and he would never let any of them get hurt if he could prevent it.

She slipped into a more balanced defensive stance and watched as the two ninja approached. Then her view was obscured by the Uchiha clan symbol proudly presented on the back of the shirt Sasuke wore.

Sakura could only watch angry as her teammates took care of the two enemy ninja. Why had Sasuke felt the need to protect her? Had she not shown during practice that she could take care of herself? That she didn’t need their help. They were acting like she was some damsel in distress or the client, not able to protect herself. And it wasn’t true.

She didn’t get the chance to say anything because Kakashi-sensei had literally popped out of the woodwork, apologizing for not acting sooner and saying he needed to know who they were targeting.

Then he gave them the option of continuing the mission or returning to the village to find one appropriate for their skill level.

Sakura took the time to think it over as Naruto immediately yelled that they had to continue with the mission (“We can’t give up now! I never give up! That’s my nindo, my ninja way!”), and Sasuke nodded in agreement. With the identities of their charge’s attackers being the Demon Brothers of the Mist; that meant this mission was really B-rank. Having to fend off high level chuunin wasn’t something gennin were supposed to be capable of, but they had managed, or Naruto and Sasuke had anyway.

In the end, Sakura agreed with her teammates and Team Kakashi kept going. The old man had lied about the mission rank because his country was poor, and he needed protection to get back to his village so he could finish the bridge that would improve Wave’s economy, which was terrible under Gatou’s control. Plus, they had already proven that they could take care of any enemy this Gatou person sent their way.

The next attack hadn’t come for a couple hours. They had the split second warning from their sensei to duck, in which all three gennin dove for the ground, Sakura taking Tazuna with her, positive he couldn’t react as fast as they could, before a giant sword flew over the place where their necks would have been and slammed into tree.

Another rogue ninja appeared, standing on the sword, critiquing the group of ninja on the ground in front of him. The lower half of his face was covered like Kakashi-sensei’s and he wore camouflage armbands, stripped pants, and no shirt. The strappings of his sword’s sheath formed an ‘X’ on his chest.

“Zabuza Momochi’s a master of the silent kill. He is a missing-nin from the Village Hidden in the Mist. Often called the Demon of the Hidden Mist. This guy’s on a whole other level. You three stay back and protect Tazuna. I’ll handle him.”

“I’m not interested in three gennin. Especially when the Copy Ninja is in front of me. And once
your dead I can deal with those three brats and kill the old man.” The demon said sadistically.

Zabuza moved first, landed on top of the water. If Sakura wasn’t afraid for her life, she would have been thinking it would be really cool to be able to stand on water.

Whatever jutsu their opponent had just used caused the already rising fog to thicken until she couldn’t see her own hand inches in front of her face. The pinkette was practically shaking as she stood before Tazuna. She was unable to see anything, even her teammates. She could only hear the clang as metal clashed as her sensei fought the demon.

“Eight choices.”

‘What? Eight choices for what?’ Sakura was worried, the killing intent this guy was releasing was crippling. The hand gripping her kunai was trembling.

“Liver, lungs, spine, clavicle vein, neck vein, brain, kidneys, heart. Which one should I go after?”

Before they even realized Zabuza had moved, he was behind them, sword ready to tear through them.

Sakura had broken out into a sweat. In close proximity his aura was crushing her. She wouldn’t have time to move before he swung his huge sword. She was going to die and fail her first mission.

Then he swung the huge blade. She could only watch as it bore down upon her.

Then Kakashi-sensei appeared between his team and Zabuza. In the same movement he halted Zabuza’s blade and pushed her and her teammates away. Then he looked at them sideways.

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect you guys even if it kills me. I don’t let my comrades die.”

The Zabuza standing behind him with a kunai in the gut turned to water and splashed to the ground

‘That was a water clone. I couldn’t tell it apart from the original. I can’t wait to learn that jutsu,’ Sakura thought.

Then she screamed, because Zabuza had appeared out of the mist and ran his sword through her sensei, cutting him in half.

She breathed as her sensei turned into water as well. Sakura marveled at his ability. He had made a water clone without anyone noticing. It was amazing what a jounin was capable of. She couldn’t wait for the day when she reached this level of fighting.

Kakashi-sensei was now behind the demon, a kunai pressed against his throat.

Sakura felt the adrenaline in her system start to leave. Her body felt like it would become limp any second now. This fight was over.

“I’m not that easy.”

The rosette watched on horrified as another Zabuza appeared behind Kakashi-sensei. The jounin drove his kunai through the Zabuza in front of him, which dissolved into water. The one behind him pulled his sword back and then swiped at Kakashi’s head.

Or where his head was previously because he had ducked.
The demon of the mist spun with the momentum of his swinging blade and delivered a kick to the silver haired man’s chest, throwing him into the water.

Zabuza was behind him as soon as Kakashi surfaced. “Water prison no Jutsu.”

If Sakura wasn’t so busy freaking out about how her sensei was trapped in a orb of water which would/ eventually drown him, and if there wasn’t yet another Zabuza water clone forming in front of them, she would have been mentally gushing about how cool that jutsu was and wondering how long it would take her to learn it.

“You guys! Take Tazuna-san and run away! You have no chance of beating him! As long as he’s keeping me trapped in this prison, he can’t move. The water clone cannot go very far from his real body. Just run away now!” Kakashi yelled.

What could Naruto, Sasuke, and she do now that he had trapped their sensei? This guy was way too strong for them if he had taken out their sensei so easily. Even Sasuke, child prodigy that he was, couldn’t face this guy on his own.

“Now way, Kakashi-sensei! Those who break the rules are scum, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum. That’s what you told us when we passed your test. There’s no way we’re leaving you behind! Believe it!” Naruto yelled.

On his own. ‘That’s it!’

If they worked as a team, utilizing all their strengths, maybe they would be able to free their sensei. Sakura decided to use a genjutsu Kurenai had taught her a few days ago. She hadn’t perfected it yet, but with the cover the mist provided, it would give her a chance to talk to her teammates without Zabuza noticing.

“Magen: Kokoni Arazu no Jutsu.” Her Demonic Illusion: False Surroundings Technique would hopefully make it seem like Team 7 was foolishly fighting Zabuza in hopes of getting him away from their sensei.

She only prayed he didn’t recognize the genjutsu immediately and dispel it.

“Sasuke, Naruto,” she hissed. Both males stopped bickering to look at her. “We have to work as a team if we’re going to save Kakashi-sensei.”

Her teammates focused their attention on her as she explained her plan.

-GENNIN-

Kakashi watched horrified as his students charged at the water clone. Naruto created dozens of his own which dog piled the Zabuza clone. Sakura, Sasuke, and the real Naruto ran around the wiggling mass of orange and shot towards the real Zabuza holding him captive.

He had told them to run away! They were no match for a rogue ninja like Zabuza. If they tried to fight him they would die. Kakashi didn’t want to watch any more of his comrades die. Especially not the team he was supposed to be teaching to become great ninja.

Naruto had made more clones to act as a line of defense as the three gennin bore down on Zabuza. Sasuke threw a handful of poorly aimed shuriken as Zabuza, who easily evaded them all by tilting his head to one side.

‘Wait a minute. Poorly aimed. Sasuke never misses his mark.’ Kakashi would have sighed in relief if he could without alerting Zabuza that something was wrong. Sakura had clearly cast a genjutsu
to keep the demon occupied while they retreated. He wondered where she had learned this one
though, because he hadn’t taught her any.

The silver haired jounin blinked as the illusion of Naruto that was about to punch Zabuza
disappeared. Had he been wrong? Was there no genjutsu at all? Had Sasuke missed on purpose
and the Naruto charging at Zabuza was actually a clone?

Kakashi blinked again as the mist lifted to reveal his three students and no water clone. What were
they still doing here? And how had they dispatched the clone? Why had Sakura ended the
genjutsu? It would have been better to leave him under if they were going to attempt a rescue.

“Hey you eyebrowless freak. Put this in your handbook. The man who will one day become
Hokage. Naruto Uzumaki.”

Kakashi blinked once more at his blonde student’s declaration. Why on earth had he said that?

Zabuza scoffed. His dark eyes were riveted on Naruto. So much so that he missed fact that Sasuke
had taken a demon shuriken out of his pack and Sakura had moved backwards. Kakashi
wondered when Naruto had given Sasuke the demon shuriken.

Zabuza used one hand to create another water clone, which wasted no time and ran towards
Naruto and Sasuke, removing his sword from its sheathe and preparing to swing.

“Doton: Chidōkaku!”

Kakashi was totally caught off guard when his female student used the Moving Earth Core
technique. And he was even more so when it worked. The Zabuza clone plummeted as the
ground beneath him vanished. Naruto and Sasuke, clearly anticipating Sakura using that jutsu,
simply split up, running around opposite sides of the fairly large hole in the ground with ease, and
continued rocketing towards Zabuza in mirrored unison.

He was going to have to sit down with Sakura and have a serious talk with her about where she
was learning these C-rank jutsus.

Naruto attacked first. Zabuza easily caught his fist and threw him away. The boy created a clone
mid-air to use as a spring board and launched himself back at Zabuza, kunai in hand.

He was caught by a hand around his throat. Sasuke then threw his demon shuriken.

The rogue ninja dropped Naruto in order to catch the large shuriken. He was surprised by the
second one hidden in the shadow of the first.

“A shuriken is no use against me,” he said as he jumped and let it fly under him.

Kakashi watched as the shuriken vanished in a poof of smoke to reveal Naruto with another kunai
in hand.

‘So Naruto transformed himself into a demon windmill shuriken and used his clones to distract
Zabuza. With one hand keeping me trapped and the other blocked with the real shuriken,’
Kakashi thought as Naruto aimed the kunai at Zabuza’s face, ‘Zabuza is going to be forced to
release me in order to escape.’

Zabuza wrenched his hand out of the water prison but still received a slice across his cheek from
Naruto’s kunai.

Kakashi felt pride for his students flood his body. He couldn’t believe they had designed and
successfully executed a plan to free him from Zabuza’s water prison jutsu. He never would have thought three gennin could have stood up to the Demon of the Hidden Mist. He was certain this would give him bragging rights against Gai. His team had been gennin for a year and had never pulled off a feat like this. It would probably win him bonus points in their rivalry competition too.

Zabuza spun around enraged; those damn brats had gotten in his way. He should have killed them first. He had no idea three little kids could cause him so much trouble.

CLANG!

The demon shuriken Zabuza had been about to throw at a defenseless Naruto was blocked by the metal on Kakashi’s fingerless gloves. He glared at Zabuza as water dripped off him and blood dripped from his fingers. Naruto landed with a splash behind him.

Sakura watched amazed as Kakashi-sensei’s and Zabuza’s hands blurred, racing through hand signs. Two enormous water dragons formed, crashed into each, and returned to the water.

Zabuza tried to attack Kakashi while the water poured down around them.

Kakashi-sensei blocked the attempt and the two men stared the other down for a few seconds beforespringing apart.

“You can’t beat me you monkey bastard! All you’re doing is copying me!”

They both raced through identical hand signs. Sakura watched fascinated as Zabuza froze and Kakashi-sensei performed the Suiton: Daibakufu no Jutsu. A great spiraling vortex of water slammed into Zabuza. The force of the water sent him crashing into a tree.

Kakashi-sensei had been about to kill him when two senbon sprouted from Zabuza’s neck.

The hunter nin that had been tracking Zabuza thanked Kakashi for his assistance and disappeared with the body.

Kakashi-sensei replaced his headband over his sharingan eye. “Now we have to get Tazuna-san back to his home. Let’s go.” He took one step and collapsed.

Sakura sighed as Naruto and Sasuke fought over who would carry their sensei. She smiled fondly. Only Kakashi-sensei would let them do most of the work, save the day in the end, and then collapse and leave them to deal with everything else.

However, Sakura thought, as they continued on having finally decided to have Naruto’s clones haul Kakashi-sensei’s dead weight, she couldn’t help but feel this niggling in the back of her mind that she was forgetting something.

They reached Tazuna’s house with no other problems. Team 7 settled their sensei in the room they were given and trooped out to let him rest and recover in peace.

All three of them were quiet, unsure of when their sensei would awaken. Not one of them believed themselves capable of protecting the bridge builder if he was attacked while Kakashi-sensei was unconscious. They may have defeated Zabuza, the Demon Hidden in the Mist, but that was due more to luck and his own arrogance than any real skill on their part.
Dinner, provided by Tazuna’s daughter, was silent on Team 7’s part. All three of them were worried about their sensei. Once the meal was over they excused themselves. Naruto and Sakura returned to the room they would be occupying during their stay, and Sasuke headed for the roof to keep watch. They weren’t really expecting anything to happen, but wanted to set up watches just in case.

Naruto went straight to his bed. He would have the second watch so he needed to sleep now. Sakura should have gone to sleep too, but she sat on the floor beside Kakashi-sensei instead. She wished there was something she could do for him as she scanned his peacefully sleeping face.

She eventually drifted off keeping vigil at her sensei’s side. A hand on her shoulder gently shook her out of her slumber during the early hours of the morning while it was still dark out.

“It’s your turn, Sakura-chan.” Sakura nodded at Naruto, stretching and groaning as her back cracked. She made her way outside, careful to wake none of the family, and scaled the building. She settled herself in, sore from sleeping in sitting position, and spread out her chakra senses. They weren’t really good. She could only sense ten meters max, but it was enough to warn her teammates if something did happen.

But nothing did. The night passed peacefully, and Sakura watched as the sun rose, painting the sky shades of orange, red, yellow, and pink.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

Sakura startled so badly that she nearly tumbled off the roof, and she would have if not for her sensei grabbing her by the back of her shirt. When on earth had he woken up? And how come he had been able to sneak up on her? She should have been able to sense him. And where did he get the crutches?

“You’re awake, Kakashi-sensei!” she exclaimed. “How are you feeling?”

Her sensei chuckled and ruffled her hair, which she scowled at. “I’m fine, Sakura-chan. A little sore, and I’ll need the aid of the crutch to move, but I’m okay.”

Sakura was relieved. They sat in companionable silence just watching the sunrise.

“I wanted to ask you Sakura, where did you learn that genjutsu and earth release jutsu. They are both C-rank jutsu. Not something most gennins are capable of. I haven’t taught you any C-rank jutsu yet.”

Sakura rubbed the back of her head sheepishly. “Well, the day you had us do the chakra paper test I went to the library to find some scrolls on earth and water jutsus. I’ve been practicing on my own.”

Kakashi had noticed she had not answered where she had learned the genjutsu but decided not to press the girl for answers. He had already guessed that she most likely had sought out another teacher. He supposed he only had himself to blame for his student leaving him for another teacher. For the three months he had been their sensei, he had focused more on promoting teamwork and completing D-rank missions than actually teaching them anything. Perhaps he could do something about that while they were here.

“Well then, why don’t we head back inside and wake the other two. We’re going to need to start training if you want to beat Zabuza.”

Kakashi smiled behind his mask as his pink haired student pestered him with questions of “Didn’t we already beat him?” and “Do you mean he’s still alive?”
Kakashi-sensei had explained that he believed Zabuza was still alive; the hunter ninja that had supposedly killed him was actually his accomplice. Then he brought them all outside saying they were going to need to train harder if they wanted a rematch with the rogue ninja.

“All right. I want you to climb these trees.”

“Climb trees? How is climbing trees going to help us beat Zabuza, Kakashi-sensei?” Naruto yelled, confused. But he wasn’t the only one. Both Sakura and Sasuke were staring at the jounin like he had hit his head too hard when he collapsed.

“Yes. You’re going to climb trees. But you’re not going to use your hands.”

“But that’s impossible!”

“No it’s not. Just focus your chakra to the bottom of your feet and . . .” Kakashi-sensei stopped talking and started walking forward.

All three of his students gaped as he walked straight up the tree.

“That’s so cool, Kakashi-sensei!” Naruto charged at the closest tree, and landed hard on the ground as he failed to make it even one step up the tree.

“It’s not as easy as it looks.” He threw three kunai, one landed at each of his students’ feet. “Use these kunai to make a slash in the bark to mark your progress.”

His students stared at him. “Well, what are you waiting for? Get at it.” Kakashi-sensei ordered.

Sasuke and Naruto immediately grabbed their kunai and raced for a tree. Sasuke made it six steps up before the bark exploded under his foot and he was pushed away from the tree. Naruto made it four before he lost his grip and fell.

Sakura took a couple seconds to clear her mind and focus her chakra. Once satisfied, she ran at her tree. She made it quickly up ten steps, twenty steps, thirty, forty. Soon she found herself out of tree trunk. She stood on the highest branch, marveling at the fact that she had got it on her first try when her teammates were still struggling with making it up a foot.

She figured she must have been over fifty meters up, because Kakashi-sensei was only a dot of silver. Naruto and Sasuke were easier to spot due to their orange and black clothes respectively. Sakura sat down on the branch, enjoying the slight breeze that blew across the treetops making her pink locks dance, and wondered how long it would take the rest of her team to notice that she had never stopped moving up the tree.

The pinkette observed her teammates, critiquing their improvement. Each successive try got them a little further up the tree, but they were still a far cry away from reaching the first branch. From what she could tell, Sasuke was putting too much chakra into his feet and the pressure was breaking the bark and launching him from the tree. Naruto, on the other, tend to not focus enough chakra, or couldn’t maintain the flow, and he lost his grip and fell.

Naruto had slipped off the tree for the umpteenth time. “Hey, Kakashi-sensei,” he called out, looking around the clearing they were practicing in, “where is Sakura-chan?”

His question had shocked Sasuke, who hadn’t noticed his female teammate’s disappearance, and frightened Kakashi because he did not know what had happened to his third student. How could
“I’m up here guys.” Sakura’s voice came from above.

All three males of Team 7 looked up to see their pink haired teammate standing on the highest branch of her tree. She grinned broadly and waved at them. Not that they could tell from that distance.

“That’s unbelievable, Sakura-chan! I can’t believe you got to the top of the tree so quickly.”

“Well, it looks like Sakura is the best at controlling chakra on this team. Why don’t you hurry on down and we’ll move on to the next step while these two keep working.”

“Next step? There’s another part to this training. Can we just skip this part and go onto the next with Sakura-chan?” Naruto whined. Kakashi-sensei shut him up with a quick hit to the head and told him to get back to training.

Sakura decided to do something different on her way down, instead of running down. She bounced from branch to branch until she was back on the forest floor. Kakashi looked visibly surprised that she could control her chakra to that extent already.

‘Walking on water will probably be easy for her as well.’ He thought.

Naruto started ranting and raving about how cool she was. Sakura had to hide her hurt when Sasuke scoffed at her and then ignored her. She had hoped he would acknowledge her.

She would just have to train more and get even stronger, she thought as she trailed after Kakashi-sensei. She would do whatever it took to prove to Sasuke that she could help him achieve his dream.

Sakura was suitably impressed when Kakashi-sensei walked on water as easily as if he was walking on solid ground. It was amazing what the ability to manipulate chakra could let one do.

“All right, Sakura. This is the same concept as the tree climbing exercise, but more complicated and more advanced. Give it a try.” Kakashi-sensei said from his place on the water’s surface.

She focused her chakra to her feet once more and tentatively placed one foot on the water. It sunk up to her ankle before steadying. She frowned and pulled her foot back out and tried again. This time the water came up to her mid-calf. Walking on water was much harder than she had thought it would be after the success she had with climbing the tree.

Kakashi chuckled at the frown on her face. “This is harder than the tree climbing exercise because you need to adjust the level of chakra in your feet to adapt to the constant movement of the water. Before, the tree was stationary, so you needed a consistent flow of chakra. However, the water’s surface is always moving, so you have to change the amount of chakra in your feet to combat the water’s movement and keep your balance.”

Sakura listened as her sensei explained this new exercise. It made sense. Now that she had a better idea of what she was supposed to be doing, she placed another foot on the water. It sunk up on the water’s surface. She let a grin form on her face as she put her second foot next to the first. She wanted to make sure she could stand on the water before she attempted to walk out to where her sensei was standing.

She stood steady on top of the water. ‘All right,’ she thought, ‘I can do this.’ She took a few slow,
cautious steps across the water towards her sensei who was watching her silently. Did he think she would be able to master this technique so quickly, or was her expecting her to only manage a few steps before she fell into the water? Sakura decided it didn’t matter. If she fell she would only stand up and try again, and keep trying until she exhausted her chakra reserves.

When she didn’t lose her grip on the water’s surface after a few baby steps, Sakura started walking normally. She grinned when she realized how easy it was now that she knew the trick to it. Then she started running, losing herself in the exhilaration she felt as she ran on top of the water.

-GENNIN-

Kakashi’s lone eye widened in shock as Sakura switched from hesitant steps to running in a matter of seconds. He hadn’t expected her to pick it up this quickly. Walking on water was much harder to learn than climbing trees. But there she was, dashing towards him as if running on water was as natural as breathing to her.

Wait a minute. Was she skating? Kakashi watched her feet closely. She was. Sakura was skating across the water. She wasn’t taking her feet away from its surface. Kakashi nearly lost his control on his own chakra. He had never heard of anyone who could skate on water.

Sakura clearly had an amazing gift for chakra control, and unprecedented one if she could adjust a jutsu that had been around for decades with no effort. Maybe he should see to finding someone to teach her some medical ninjutsu. She had the chakra control to excel in that field, and it would benefit the team if one of its members could perform medical jutsu.

-GENNIN-

Sakura was undeniably pleased as Kakashi-sensei congratulated her and stated how proud of her he was. She was even happier when he told her she could do as she saw fit for the rest of the afternoon while he went back to supervise Naruto and Sasuke.

She watched him vanish into the trees before she broke out into a completely embarrassing happy dance that she was glad none of her teammates had seen or would ever see. Now she would have a chance to practice on the water jutsus she had been studying.

Now that she had the chakra control, she could start on the Mizu Hari jutsu which would form senbons out of water that she could throw.

-GENNIN-

Sakura was exhausted when Kakashi-sensei came to fetch her to return to Tazuna’s house. Even with her new mastery over her chakra, she hadn’t gotten as far as she would have liked with her Water Needle jutsu.

Though, judging by the dirt, scrapes, and scowls the boys were sporting, neither Sasuke nor Naruto were happy with their progress today either. She basked in the accomplishment she felt because she had finished not only the tree climbing exercise before the boys, but the water walking one as well. It looked like chakra control was the one area she was better than both Naruto and Sasuke.

Dinner turned into an eating contest between Naruto and Sasuke, both of whom she berated for wasting food when they brought it back up. Despite Kakashi-sensei’s assurances that he was fine and that Zabuza and whoever he was working with took a couple days to regroup, the three of them set a watch schedule for the night. Tonight Sakura was first so that her teammates would
have time to restore some of the chakra they had used during training while they slept.

-GENNIN-

It took Sakura three days to master the Mizu Hari jutsu. The two male gennin of Team 7 were still working on reaching the top of the tree. Kakashi-sensei had decided she should accompany Tazuna to the bridge to guard him. It had been four days since Zabuza’s attack, and her sensei thought that was enough time for their enemy to ready themselves. He still thought it unlikely that they would attack yet, but he sent Sakura on protection duty as a precaution.

She still had the evening to practice her water jutsu. It was so much easier to do so in Wave, where there was a large abundance of water present every way she turned. Many water jutsus required a preexisting source of water, and a large one at that. The largest source of water in Konoha was property of the Uchiha clan, and Sakura wasn’t comfortable enough or close enough to Sasuke to ask him if she could use his family’s lake to practice water jutsu.

The next jutsu she planned on trying was Suiton: Teppōo. The Water Release: Archerfish jutsu would create a jet of controllable water that shot from her mouth. It was a short range jutsu but at point blank it would certainly be damaging, and Zabuza preferred close quarters fighting.

However, this technique was even harder to learn then Mizu Hari had been. Sakura was growing extremely frustrated with the pitiful stream of water that emerged every time she tried the jutsu. It wasn’t anything like a stream, really. More like she had been choking on water and someone had slapped her on the back causing her to spit it out.

Sakura had gotten annoyed with her failures, so she decided to take a break. Ever since Kakashi-sensei had taught them chakra control she wondered if it would be possible to draw water from the air around her. She knew it was partially made of water vapor. If she could turn that vapor into water, Sakura would have a constant viable source of water wherever she went, even if it was to Suna’s deserts.

But this was proving just as hard, if not more so, as the Water Release: Archerfish jutsu to perform. All things considered, it was probably more difficult because she was turning a gas into a liquid and there were no set seals for such and endeavor.

She wondered how she would go about this. Should she wait until they got back to Konoha so she could do some research on the topic, or keep trying to do it on her own? It was possible that nobody else had ever thought of it. Iruka-sensei had never mentioned it during his lesson on famous ninja in the Five Great Nations, and Sakura was sure if someone had managed to make water out of thin air he or she would be well known.

Maybe if she focused her chakra into her fingers she could extend it from her fingertips into the air and use it to mold the water.

-GENNIN-

Kakashi watched the girl that he called his favorite student, only to himself in any case. He decided to check in on her and see just what she had doing the fast five days he had given her free reign while he coached Naruto and Sasuke. He could sense the chakra building in her hands, but he had no clue what she was attempting to do. She wasn’t weaving any hand signs, so it wasn’t any jutsu, but he couldn’t think of any reason for her to gather chakra in her hands if it wasn’t for a jutsu.

Sure there were chakra control exercises that used such methods, like catching a leaf and floating it above one’s palm, but that was a technique taught in the academy and she had already mastered
the more advanced forms of chakra control.

The jounin blinked and furiously rubbed his eyes, sure he was seeing things. When he looked again it was still there. Sakura had somehow formed water in the palm of her hand. It wasn’t much, just a couple drops, but the fact that she had done it was incredible. How had a green behind the ears gennin managed to create water?

Kakashi was going to end up in the hospital if the girl kept surprising him like this. He watched as the water in her hand expanded until she had to use two hands to hold it. He made up his mind to keep a close eye trained on her and to make more of an effort to actually teach her new jutsu. If she could learn this quickly and come up with amazing things without prompt she could certainly start learning C-rank jutsus.

For being the daughter of civilians and the first ninja in her family, Sakura was definitely a strong ninja, even at the age of twelve. The ball of water was growing in size and now floating above her outstretched hands. She was turning out to be a child prodigy like Itachi Uchiha, Sasuke and Neji Hyuuga.

At the rate his students were improving, maybe he should consider signing them up for this year’s chunnin exams. It was unusual to nominate new gennin for the chuunin exams, but he felt reasonably well that they could pass.

‘Maybe even with flying colors,’ he thought.

-GENNIN-

Team 7 had been in the Land of Waves for a week before Zabuza came after them. Just the night before Naruto and Sasuke had finally managed to master the tree climbing exercise. Sasuke had joined her and Kakashi-sensei on the bridge for babysitting duty as she had dubbed it. Naruto was back at Tazuna’s house recovering from exhaustion, both physical and chakra.

However, the sight that greeted them at the bridge was not one Sakura was used to. The few workers that hadn’t quit on the old man in fear were injured.

‘So Zabuza and his partner are here.’

Sakura took a protective stance in front of the bridge builder, gladly letting Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke take charge of this battle. Her taijutsu still wasn’t good enough to fight Zabuza in a hand to hand combat fight, even if she had a nearly endless supply of senbon.

Hopefully she would be able to let Kakashi-sensei handle this and defend herself and Tazuna if the need arose.

Just like the last time they had battle Zabuza, the mist rising off the water thickened, cloaking the rogue ninja’s presence.

“Long time no see, Kakashi,” the demon said sarcastically. “Just look at you, still associating with brats. The dark haired one is shaking.”

A half dozen water clones surrounded Sakura, Sasuke, Kakashi and the bridge builder at the announcement. Sakura formed the hand signs for the Earth Release: Earth Dome jutsu. It would form a rock dome around her and Tazuna, shielding them from most normal attacks.

With Kakashi-sensei’s encouragement, Sasuke dealt with the water clones. He smirked as he returned to his place on the bridge builder’s right. “I’ll take care of the masked guy.”
Kakashi-sensei nodded in agreement with Sasuke’s plan. Sakura had Tazuna move a safe distance away from the upcoming battle, fully prepared to protect him and provide the support her sensei and teammate might need.

She was shocked at the speed at which the masked guy moved, and even more so when Sasuke managed to match him. She hadn’t known Sasuke could move that fast. She could hear the clink that resulted every time their kunais struck.

After a few minutes of fast, furious fighting, they both stopped, standing motionless with kunai pressed against each other. “I’m impressed you could keep up with me.” She heard the masked guy say. “But you won’t continue to do so. I have two advantages.”

“Two advantages?” her teammate parroted.

“The first is the water on the ground. And the second is that I have occupied one of your arms. Now you will only be able to run from my attacks.”

How could he attack? If he was occupying one of Sasuke’s hands that meant the mask guy only had one hand available to him to use. ‘Unless he could perform one handed signs like Zabuza did!’

Sakura didn’t want to take any chances. “Suiton: Teppōo!”

A jet of water shot from her mouth and blasted into Zabuza’s accomplice, forcing him to disengage from Sasuke and retreat. Sasuke shot her a glare for interrupting his battle.

“Oh, there’s the pink haired brat that felled my clone. I had wondered where you had gotten to. I owe you for that you know.”

What did that mean? Was he going to target her because she had screwed up his plan the last time? That was not good. She was in no way capable of standing up to Zabuza if he tried to kill her. Why on earth did she have to attract the psychotic ninja’s attention?

“I can’t have you underestimating my team by calling them brats. Sasuke is the Leaf Village’s number one rookie. Sakura here is the brightest in the village, quite the genius. And the other one is the number one most unpredictable, hyperactive, knuckleheaded ninja in the village.” Kakashi-sensei deadpanned.

Zabuza chuckled darkly. “At this rate we’ll be driven back. We can’t have that, Haku.”

Before Sakura could even contemplate what the rogue ninja was hinting at, Haku had acted. “Makyou Hyoushou: Demonic Ice Crystal Mirrors!”

A wall of ice mirrors surrounded Sasuke, blocking his escape 360 degrees around and even above.

‘What is this jutsu?’ Sakura thought as Haku sank into one of the ice mirrors.

Sasuke was trapped inside Haku’s jutsu and Sakura didn’t know how she could help him. She would be off the most use if she worked to end the jutsu from the outside, where Haku couldn’t reach her, but she didn’t know any long range jutsus and couldn’t risk leaving Tazuna unprotected or bringing him with her across the battlefield. That would make it too easy for Zabuza to get him.

Kakashi-sensei tried to get around the mist ninja, only to find his way blocked by him once again. “Your opponent is me. Besides, with that jutsu he’s finished.”
Terror and fear gripped at Sakura’s heart. Was Sasuke truly finished? Was there nothing she could do to help him? Maybe she could use her Water Needle technique to give him a weapon. No. That wouldn’t do any good. Sasuke didn’t have her water nature chakra or her skill with chakra control. He wouldn’t be able to use it. Maybe she could throw it at Haku instead.

Sakura molded two water needles and launched them at the gap in the mirrors where the older boy appeared when he moved between them. However, a few meters away from her and the needles lost their shape, becoming a puddle of water on the bridge.

She winced when Sasuke yelled out in pain. She felt so useless. She couldn’t go help Sasuke without leaving Tazuna unprotected, and she couldn’t aid Kakashi-sensei in his battle with Zabuza, even though it did look like he was going to come after her.

She desperately wished Naruto would show up. With everyone’s attention occupied in some form, the blonde would be able to help destroy the ice mirrors from the outside, and there wasn’t anything Zabuza or Haku could do to stop him. If Zabuza tried to interfere Kakashi-sensei would stop him, and in order for Haku to do anything, he would have to leave his prison of mirrors, which would allow Sasuke to escape.

Smoke appeared and curled upwards. “Naruto Uzumaki had finally arrived!” Sakura wanted to hit her head on the nearest hard surface at his loud arrival. What kind of ninja was he?

And then he became even dumber in her eyes by sneaking into the damn mirrors. It was like he didn’t stop to think about the best strategy to defeat an opponent of an unknown level.

“Hidden Mist no Jutsu.”

Not this jutsu again! Now Sakura wouldn’t be able to see anything. How could she defend herself and Tazuna if she couldn’t see the attacker?

“Oh no!”

What was Kakashi-sensei so worried about? Had he lost sight of Zabuza? Was the demon going after Naruto and Sasuke? She got her answer when she felt the spike in killing intent appear behind her. She whirled around to the other side of Tazuna, placing herself between him and Zabuza.

“Earth Release: Earth Dome jutsu!” Zabuza’s giant sword rebounded off the dome of rock that had formed around her and Zabuza.

Sakura was trembling and sweating as she made sure to keep her chakra flow steady. This barrier would only last as long as she didn’t move and focused all her attention and chakra on maintaining the technique. Even then she was afraid the shield would fall apart. She hadn’t mastered this jutsu yet. Her unfamiliarity with this jutsu might mean that it would only last a few more seconds.

But it didn’t. The earthen dome continued to hold and Sakura sighed in relief. Until Zabuza found a way to break through the dome, she and Tazuna were safe. The only disadvantage was she couldn’t see the battle going on around her. She would just have to believe in the rest of her team and hope they won before her jutsu ran out.

-KAKASHI-

Kakashi was so relieved when Sakura had managed to use the Earth Dome jutsu to protect herself. With this damn mist and Zabuza fighting with his eyes closed, he was at a distinct disadvantage. He would have to wait for Zabuza to make his move and try to counter.
But he knew that wasn’t good enough. Just now he could have lost another teammate because he couldn’t react fast enough. If Sakura had not made that dome, she would have been dead.

‘I need to end this fight now. Sakura can’t hold up that technique indefinitely. It will drain her chakra reserves until she’s dry, and when it falls she’ll be defenseless.’

“I don’t just rely on my Sharingan, Zabuza. I was a former member of the Anbu.” He removed a scroll from one of the pouches of his flak vest, unrolling it and smearing the blood on his fingers from when he blocked Zabuza’s kunai on it.

He froze as a massive killing intent smothered him. Was it Zabuza? No, this was much more evil, more malicious. It couldn’t be! ‘Did the seal break? Had the Nine-Tails been released? No. It has just weakened. The fox’s chakra and killing aura is just slipping out. But still, this isn’t good. What could have happened to make Naruto lose control?’

Kakashi sealed the scroll up and slammed it into the ground. “Kuchiyose: Doton: Tsuiga no Jutsu!”

“These are my cute nin dogs. I purposely let you spill my blood so they could track you.” He said to an immobilized Zabuza. The ninja hounds he had summoned had all latched their teeth onto some part of Zabuza’s body.

“Now you will die. You went too far, Zabuza, when you tried to kill my comrades. I told you before I wouldn’t ever let another one of my comrades die. Now I will show you an original jutsu that I created.”

He gripped his right wrist with his left hand. He focused chakra to his hand, so much that his chakra became visible. The high concentration of lighting created made a sound reminiscent of thousands of chirping birds. “Chidori!”

He stood from his crouch. “I’ll ask once more. Surrender. Your future is death.”

“I don’t care for your ideals.” Zabuza answered.

Kakashi sprinted at Zabuza. His lightning covered fist came forward and impacted.

The silver haired jounin’s eyes widened as blood splattered his face. His hand had gone straight through the Haku guy’s chest. He had appeared out of nowhere in front of Zabuza. Kakashi didn’t even notice his nin dogs had disappeared as he stared at his hand in the boy’s chest cavity.

The battle went downhill from there. Zabuza and Kakashi fought a fast paced taijutsu battle; Kakashi clearly had the upper hand. He aimed for the demon’s arms, rendering them both useless so Zabuza could no longer make seals.

“So you’re getting your ass kicked. How pathetic.” And then Gatou and his army of mercenaries showed up. “The plan’s changed. I’m going to kill you here, Zabuza. This was actually the plan from the beginning. I was never going to pay you your money.”

“Kakashi,” Zabuza said, “I’m sorry. This fight is over. Now that I have no reason to go after Tazuna I have no reason to fight you.”

Kakashi “Aa-ed” in agreement.

Then Naruto started shouting at Zabuza about how he should do something about Gatou, who was kicking Haku’s body, because he was Haku’s friend and didn’t he have any feelings.
Naruto kept up his speech, tearing strips into the Demon Hidden in the Mist for only thinking of Haku as a tool to be thrown away when it was broken and useless when Haku had loved him and given his life for Zabuza.

“Kid,” Zabuza interrupted, “you don’t need to say any more.” Zabuza was crying. Somehow, miraculously Kakashi thought, Naruto’s words had reached Zabuza’s long dead emotions.

“Kid, let me borrow your kunai.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” Naruto threw his kunai to Zabuza, who caught it in his teeth.

The Demon Hidden in the Mist proceeded to show just how he got that name as he attacked Gatou’s men with just a single kunai held in his mouth. He tore through the paid lackeys until he reached Gatou, removing his head from his shoulders when he did so.

-GENNIN-

“Ne, Sakura-chan, you can release the jutsu now.”

Sakura sagged in relief when she heard her sensei’s voice as he rapped on her rock barrier. She released the jutsu and fell into Kakashi-sensei’s waiting arms.

She looked at the carnage that had occurred while she couldn’t see. Zabuza and Haku were both dead, their bodies placed next to each other. At the far end of the bridge were more bodies she didn’t recognize, but she figured one of them was Gatou.

The citizens of Wave had shown up, hold an assortment of weapons. Inari, who was in the lead of them, ran across the bridge upon seeing his grandfather was alive.

She gazed up at her sensei’s face. His Sharingan was still uncovered and there was drying blood everywhere. “Where are Naruto and Sasuke? Are they okay?”

Kakashi-sensei gave her a soft smile. “Naruto’s just fine. Sasuke is going to need a couple days to recover, but he’s alright.”

Sakura smiled and fainted. The loss of adrenaline and extreme chakra exhaustion was too much for her body to handle.

-GENNIN-

It took two weeks before Sakura and Sasuke had recovered enough to travel. Team 7 held a small funeral for Haku and Zabuza before starting their return journey. Naruto bragged the first couple of miles about how Tazuna had name the bridge The Great Naruto Bridge. Sakura secretly wondered if Tazuna was drunk when he did so but felt Naruto earned it because he had been the hero of the battle.

All in all, Sakura was pleased with how their first mission out of the village had ended. For being a C-rank turned A-rank mission, Team Kakashi had handled the difficulty extremely well. Just the fact that they had survived against an opponent like Zabuza was a miracle.

But it gave her bragging rights over Ino-pig. She had completed a dangerous A-rank mission before her rival even stepped foot out of the village.

The one thing she was not pleased with was her two teammates’ behavior. Ever since they had returned from Wave a week ago they had become unbearable. The smallest things all of a sudden became a competition between Naruto and Sasuke. She was getting ready to tear her hair out.
At this point she quite preferred training with Gai-sensei and Kurenai-sensei than she did with her own team. Although she had to give Kakashi-sensei credit. After giving them three days off as a reward for successfully completely an A-rank mission, he had actually taken to teaching them a new jutsu before giving them the day’s mission assignment.

While she was happy Kakashi-sensei was taking his duties as a jounin sensei seriously, the atmosphere surrounding Team 7 was so intense. She second guessed every word she spoke and every action she made, afraid she would somehow incite her teammates’ rivalry to ridiculous levels.

They had just finished a mission pulling weeds for a client. Unfortunately for Naruto, he pulled out her medicinal herbs as well as the weeds and got smacked around by a broom for it. Said blonde was currently walking her home despite her protests that it wasn’t necessary.

She was surprised when her blonde teammate seemed to know the three creepy kids that were following them in the disguise of a square shaped rock of all things. Surprise turned to rage when Konohamaru insinuated that she was Naruto’s girlfriend and the idiot agreed with the brat.

Knuckles cracked, skin bruised, noses bled, and little boys ran away pissing their pants for calling her ugly. Both Konohamaru and Naruto received lumps on the head.

Then the annoying brat with the way too long scarf insulted her forehead. Naruto froze, completely aware of the world of pain he was about to enter for his somewhat apprentice’s unfortunate comment. In hopes of escaping the inevitable fist to the skull, Naruto told the three academy students to run, an the four of them ran like their lives depending on it while enraged Sakura chased after them.

The situation got worse when Konohamaru bumped into two strange ninja. Sakura knew by the headbands they wore that the two newcomers were Sand ninja. Both of them gave her the creeps. The female was glaring down at Konohamaru, her blonde hair pulled back into four spiky ponytails. She was standing with her hands on her hips and had a large metal fan strapped to her back. Her partner was male, dressed in a mostly black jumpsuit and wearing purple makeup on his face. He had something creepy wrapped up on his back. She could see the hair sticking out over his shoulder.

The male ninja easily lifted Konohamaru up by his scarf. “I hate brats like you.”

Naruto, in a stroke of genius in her opinion, said, “You better put him down. He’s the Hokage’s grandson. You’ll get in major trouble for threatening the Hokage’s grandson.”

However the Sand ninja didn’t seem to care. If he did anything it was tighten his grip on poor Konohamaru’s scarf practically choking the boy.

Sakura could only watch as the confrontation unraveled, reaching the point she thought a fight would break out between Naruto and the male foreigner. Then Sasuke showed up, sitting in a tree, nailing the male ninja in the hand with a rock, forcing him to drop Konohamaru.

“What are you bastards doing in our village?”

“Hey punk! Get down here. I hate show offs like you the most.” The guy in black made to remove whatever the thing on his back was.

“Kankuro stop it.” The voice that had halted Kankuro set Sakura’s teeth on edge. It came from a male Sand ninja standing on the underside of a branch of the same tree Sasuke was sitting in. He
had blood red hair, a kanji on his forehead that she couldn’t determine, and a gourd strapped to his back. But his eyes, the cold jade eyes were dead. The only thing she could see in them was thinly controlled bloodlust.

‘How did I not notice him?’ she thought as he continued speaking.

The one identified tried to make explanations to the red head called Gaara but he was having none of it. In the same breath he threatened to kill his own teammate and gave an apology for his behavior. In a whirl of sand he appeared crouched on the ground between the other two Sand ninja.

“Let’s go.”

“Wait a minute. Judging by your headbands, you’re ninja from the Village Hidden in the Sand. What are you doing in Konoha?”

The irritable blonde female explained how they were there for the chuunin selection exams, which set Naruto off into a burst of uncontrollable excitement at the thought of being able to become a chuunin so soon. (“We’ll just have to convince Kakashi-sensei to sign us up. No way am I going to pass up the chance to kick the teme’s ass and become a chuunin. This will get me one step closer to becoming Hokage!”)

Sasuke and Gaara exchanged names and then the team of gennin from the Sand village left. Sakura ignored the commotion still going on behind her and went home to study some more of the jutsus in the scrolls she had taken from the library before the escort mission turned insane grudge match.

-GENNIN-

Kakashi-sensei was once again late to the meeting he called at the bridge. Sakura was getting fairly annoyed by her sensei’s attitude. Why call a team meeting if he was going to be late every damn time?

Of course he appeared just as tensions were running high and her patience was fraying thin. He completely derailed any possible breakout of a fight between Naruto and Sasuke by announcing he had nominated them for the chuunin exams.

Naruto took his application eagerly and glomped the jounin. “I love you, Kakashi-sensei!”

“Anyway. It’s up to each of you if you want to actually participate. If you do, take those papers to room 301 by four p.m. tomorrow.” And then their sensei was gone.

Sakura knew she was going to take the chuunin exams. She had to prove to Sasuke that she was strong. This was the perfect opportunity to do that.

-GENNIN-

Team 7 had decided to meet up outside the building where the test was taking place. One look at her teammates told Sakura they were just as ready and excited for this test as she was.

For the life of her, Sakura couldn’t understand why there was a crowd of ninja blocking the second floor. She understood when she saw two chuunin standing in front of a door with a sign that proclaimed they were blocking room 301. They were pushing around a gennin from the Leaf Village that was trying to get by them and enter the testing room.

“No, Sasuke,” she whispered. Both boys turned their heads to look at her. “This is a genjutsu.
Let’s go around and go to the third floor. I think they’re trying to pick out the weaker ninja.”

Her teammates nodded their assent and the three of them edged around the crowd to the stairs that led to the third floor.

They were almost there when a male voice called out. “Where are you three going?”

Sasuke turned around, smirk on his face. Sakura mentally begged for him not to pull anything like what she expected Naruto to do. “We’re going to the third floor. This hallway is covered in a genjutsu. Sakura here spotted it immediately. She has the sharpest eyes on our team.”

Sakura was pleasantly surprised. Not only was it the longest she think she had ever heard him speak, but he had praised her ability to detect genjutsu quickly. That meant her training was working. He was taking notice of her!

On the other hand, she was a little annoyed that he carelessly offered that piece of information to all these enemy ninja.

Determined to get out of their before Sasuke unintentionally told any more of their abilities to the competitors, Sakura grabbed both boys by the wrist and dragged them upstairs. Their complaints about being manhandled fell on deaf ears.

Sakura nearly had a heart attack when she saw Kakashi-sensei standing outside room 301. Who on earth would have thought he could show up early for anything?

“I’m so glad all three of you showed up.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sakura asked, suspicious.

“I lied earlier. The chuunin exams can only be taken by teams of three. If one of you had decided not to participate none of you would have been able to take the test.”

‘Great. Thanks for tricking us Kakashi-sensei.’

“Whatever, Kakashi-sensei. We’re all here so let’s go show those guys just how strong Team Kakashi is!” Naruto cheered.

Kakashi-sensei smiled at them proudly as they entered the double doors.

Sakura nearly stopped walking at the sight that greeted her green eyes. The room was crowded. ‘There’s so many gennins taking this exam. Can we really pass? Some of them look pretty strong.’

They were only a few steps in the room when someone screeched and tackled Sasuke from behind. It turned out to be Ino. That meant Shikamaru and Chouji were around somewhere.

Then Team 8, made up of Kiba, Shino, and Hinata showed up. Surprisingly, it was Kiba who commented on the fact that all of this year’s rookies were participating in the exams.

A fellow Konoha gennin Sakura had never seen before approached them. Sakura was immediately wary of him. He explained the basics of the chuunin exams, he knew them well enough seeing that this was his seventh time in them, and offered to share information he had on any gennin taking the exam.

Sasuke took up his offer, wanting to know about Gaara of the Desert.

“Gaara of the Desert. Mission history: Wow, 8 C-rank and 1 B-rank as a gennin. I don’t know
much about him since he’s a newcomer from a different village, but it seems that he’s returned from all of his missions without a scratch.”

‘Without a scratch? How was that possible?’ They had gone on an A-rank mission and all three of them had gotten injured in some way, Sasuke more so than her or Naruto.

Kabuto left after giving them that information. The rookie gennin eyed the other gennins warily. It was looking like this exam was going to be even harder than they imagined.

Then Naruto did something that only Naruto would have ever even contemplated doing.

“My name is Naruto Uzumaki! I won’t lose to you bastards! You got that!”

Sakura was horrified. Was he trying to get them killed? Now every team in this test was going to be gunning for them.

-GENNIN-

Outside the doors Kakashi sighed. Maybe he was underestimating his gennins. Although shouting out the competition certainly was something only Naruto would ever do.

He knew even though they had only been gennin for four months that his team was capable of taking this exam. He knew they were each strong in their own right, but even he wasn’t expecting any of them to make chuunin their first time through. This was another learning opportunity for them. They needed to see that there were gennins out there stronger than them. Hopefully they would come out of this exam more mature than they went in.

Although he wasn’t sure himself if Naruto could grow up.

-GENNIN-

A huge cloud of smoke formed in the front of the room. It dispersed to reveal Ibiki Morino (‘oh dear god! Is he going to be proctoring this exam?’) and two dozen or so chuunin behind him. “Thanks for waiting. I’m Ibiki Morino, the examiner for the chuunin selection exam’s first test.”

Sakura wanted to bash her head against something hard. So she did. There was no way this exam wasn’t going to be torture if he was in charge. For god’s sake he turned a simple D-rank painting mission into a nightmare with a single question.

“Those pigs that disobey me will be failed immediately. Do I make myself clear?” he glared at the entire room. Everyone hurried to show that they understood. Sakura was starting to feel really nervous and began doubting herself. She wasn’t sure now that she was ready to take the chuunin exams.

‘No. Remember what Sasuke said. You have the best eyes on the team. And you’ve been practicing really hard for this. Don’t let all that training go to waste. Don’t let this freak scare you away. You have to prove to Sasuke that you are strong.’ Her brain shouted at her.

“We will now start the first test in the chuunin exams. Instead of your current seating arrangements, you will pick one of these numbers and sit in the seat assigned to you. We will then
Sakura was worried as soon as she spotted the papers clutched in one of the chuunin’s hands. While she and Sasuke could easily pass a written exam, Naruto was practically guaranteed to fail. It only got worse when Ibiki explained the rules of the exam.

“There are many important rules to the first exam, and questions will not be allowed so listen carefully,” the man began. “The first rule. You guys all start off with 10 points. The test is made up of ten questions each worth a point, but this test uses a subtraction system. Basically, if you answer all the questions correctly, you keep your 10 points. But you lose a point for every wrong answer.

“The second rule. This is a team test. Whether you pass or not will be determined by the combined score of your teammates.” That made Sakura feel so much better. Even if Naruto completely bombed the test, she and Sasuke would be able to pull them through. “So each team will compete to see how many points they can hold on to from the initial team total of 30.

“Now the most important rule, the third rule. Anyone caught by the testing officers cheating will have two points subtracted for each offense. So there will be some who will lose all their points during the exam and be asked to leave. Realize that the pathetic ones that get caught cheating will be destroying themselves. As shinobis trying to achieve the level of chuunin, be proud ninjas.

“And the third rule. Those that lose all their initial points during the test and those that don’t answer any questions correctly will be failed along with their two teammates.” Sakura’s heart dropped to her stomach. Naruto now had to answer one question correctly or all three of them would be failed.

“The exam will last one hour. BEGIN!” Ibiki shouted the last word.

Sakura scanned her test. The first question was a cryptogram that wasn’t too hard to figure out. ‘Second question. Line B, seen in the picture, is the greatest possible distance a shinobi can throw his shuriken from a tree of 7 meters. For enemies that appear within the circumference of the shuriken’s range, explain the attack options using this distance. Show your work.’

These questions were impossible. No normal gennin, let alone Naruto would be able to answer them. Of the people Sakura knew, she believed that Sasuke, Shikamaru and herself would be able to answer these questions with ease. ‘But why would they give us a test that was impossible to pass?’

Realization came to Sakura. It didn’t actually matter what answers you out down, but where you got the answers from. Ibiki had made such a big deal about how cheaters would be punished to put many shinobi off the idea, but it was the only way to insure that you got the right answers. The whole point of this test was to gather information without being noticed.

Sakura set to work on her test. She believed even if Naruto couldn’t answer any of the questions that he would realize the real meaning behind the test and find a way to get the answers.

When the forty-five minute mark rolled around, thirteen teams had been disqualified. “Okay. Now we will start the tenth question.

“Now before we get to it I would like to go over the added rules for this question.” He was briefly interrupted by the Kankuro guy returning from the bathroom. “I’ll now explain. These are the rules of desperation. For this tenth question you must decide whether you’ll take it or not.”

“Choose! What happens if we choose not to?” Temari shouted.
‘If you choose not to, your points will be reduced to zero. You fail along with your two teammates!’

“That’s not even given us a choice.” One gennin shouted.

“Of course we’ll choose to take it if not doing so means we fail.” Another said.

“And now the other rule. If you choose to take it and answer incorrectly, the person will lose the right to take the chuunin selection exam again!”

Protests rang loudly through the room. That wasn’t fair.

“But I’m giving you a way out.” The room became silent. “Those that aren’t confident can choose not to take it and try again next year.

“Now let’s begin the tenth question. Those that do not wish to take it, raise your hand. Once your number is confirmed, leave.”

One by one gennin raised their hands. Teams started piling out in droves.

Sakura worried about Naruto. She was confident she could answer the question, but Naruto most likely wouldn’t. Naruto wasn’t a tactical thinker. Maybe it would be better if he raised his hand and they took the exam again next year.

Just as she was thinking of raising her own hand so Naruto wouldn’t lose his dream of becoming Hokage, Naruto stood and raised his hand.

He slammed it on his desk. “Don’t underestimate me! I will not run! I’ll take it! Even if I’m a gennin forever, I’ll will myself to becoming Hokage anyway, so I don’t care! I’m not afraid!”

No one spoke after Naruto said his piece. All eyes were on the examiner, awaiting the final question.

“I’ll ask you again. Your life is riding on this decision. This is your last chance to quit.”

“I follow my unbending words. That’s my ninja way.” Naruto said, not backing down. He met Ibiki’s gaze head on.

“Good decisions. Now, to everyone still remaining, I congratulate you on passing the first test!”

Sakura sagged in relief. She had been so worried that Naruto would cause them to fail. She tuned out the clamor around her. She decided, as Ibiki explained how there really was no tenth question and the overall purpose of the exam, that he was much more scary when he was smiling.

She changed her mind again when he removed his bandana to reveal the top of his head. The sheer amount of burns, screw holes and scars made her sick to her stomach. She never wanted to be a prisoner.

The window exploded inward. In a matter of seconds a woman with spiky purple hair and a tan trench coat stood before a banner. “This is no time to be lying about. I am the examiner for the second test! Anko Mitarashi! Now let’s go! Follow me!”

Nobody moved. Ibiki stepped out from behind the banner and mutter, “Bad timing.”

“78. Ibiki! You left 26 teams! The test was way too easy this time!”

‘Easy?’ Sakura thought. ‘She thought all that stress and pressure was easy?’
“I’ll cut them at least in half in the second exam. I’ll explain everything once we’ve changed places, follow me.”

-GENNIN-

The second part of the chuunin exams was going to take place in the largest, darkest, creepiest forest that Sakura had ever seen. There were multiple chains and locks on the entrance gate and a sign that proclaimed ‘Danger! Stay Out!’

“Welcome to the stage for the second test. Practice Arena 44.” The proctor of the second exam said with a smile. Sakura bemoaned the thought of having to deal with another sadistic examiner. “Also known as the ‘Forest of Death.’”

The grin on her face got scarier. “You’ll soon find out why it’s called the ‘Forest of Death.’”

Naruto mocked her. She sliced his face with a kunai.

“Kids like you are killed quickly.” She was behind him, giggling of all things. Then she totally creeped Naruto and Sakura out by licking the blood from the cut on his left cheek.

“Now, before we start the second test there’s something I need to pass out.” She waved a stack of papers. “You have to sign these agreement forms. There will be deaths in this one and if you don’t sign these it will be my responsibility.” The lady was smiling again.

“I’m going to explain the second test, then you can sign it afterwards. And then each team will check in at that booth behind me.

“Simply put, you will attempt the ultimate survival.”

Sakura got the feeling that this would be nothing like Kakashi-sensei’s survival exercise. This one was for real.

“First I’ll explain the arena in which it will take place. Around Arena number 44, there are 44 locked gates. Forest, river and a tower in the center. From the gates to the tower is about ten kilometers.

“During the survival in here, you will be asked to complete a certain task. Using your many weapons and jutsus, you will compete in a no rules scroll battle. You will fight over these two scrolls.” She showed them a black and a white scroll, each one marked with a kanji. ‘The ‘Heaven’ and ‘Earth.’

“There are 78 people here, meaning 26 teams. Half will get the ‘Heaven Scroll,’ and the other 13 teams will each receive the ‘Earth Scroll.’ To pass this test, your team must make it to the tower with both scrolls.

“But there’s a time limit. This test will last exactly five days. 13 teams passing is not likely. As the days go on, the distance to the goal will become longer, and the time to rest will grow shorter. And the arena is crawling with enemies, so you won’t get much sleep. So not only will some fail by losing the scroll, but some will die because of the harshness of the course.

“Now I’ll talk about what will disqualify you. First, those that don’t make it to the tower with both scrolls within the time limit. Second, those that lose a teammate or those that have a teammate killed. As a rule, there is no quitting in middle. You’ll be in the forest for five days. And one more rule. You must not look inside the scroll until you make it to the tower.
“Exchange the three forms for a scroll and choose a gate. A final word of advice. Don’t die.”

-GENNIN-

Team Kakashi hurried to get their scroll and pick a gate. Sakura pointed out that the best gate to pick would be one that was close to the river. The map that Anko had showed them depicted the river going right under the tower at the forest’s center. They would be able to follow the river to the tower and would always have a supply of water on hand.

As soon as the instructor threw open the gate, the member of Team 7 dashed through and took to the trees.

Sakura was surprised how quick flying their first two days in the forest were. From what Anko had said, she expected to never have a moment of peace from the second they stepped through the gate. But aside from some giant ferocious wolves, a colony of blood sucking bats, a patch of deceptively innocent man eating plants, vines that tried to pull them into the ground and strangle them, a colony of venomous spiders taller than the three of them, and a pack horses with six legs that tried to stampede them, the test was pretty peaceful so far.

They were maybe halfway to the tower, but they had yet to see a sign of any other ninja.

Sakura was leaping through the trees between the two boys. Her body was tightly wound. The laws of karma would eventually come into effect and they would be facing danger beyond their imagination.

She shook her head and tried to shake off the impending feeling of doom that was creeping upon her. She needed to focus on this test or she would get killed. She sent her chakra out once more, listening intently. It came back to her. There were no ninja anywhere with 25 meters of them, and she could hear nothing but the sound of their shoes on the branches.

Nothing but their shoes on the branches.

How could she not have noticed? She was so surprised that she momentarily lost control of her chakra and fell out of the tree. Luckily she caught herself, grabbing a lower branch and using it to swing herself back up to her teammates level.

Both of them had stopped and were staring at her.

She quickly jumped to the branched they were standing on. “Guys, listen.”

Naruto cocked his head, trying to listen to whatever he was supposed to be hearing. Sasuke simply gave her a long suffering look and raised an eyebrow, demanding that Sakura explain why she had stopped them.

“What do you two hear?”

Naruto was the one to answer. “Nothing, Sakura-chan.”

“Exactly. We’re in the middle of a forest. It shouldn’t be silent.” Sasuke’s eyes widened as he caught on to what she was hinting at. “I think we’ve been caught in a genjutsu.”

They argued for a few minutes in undertone, but eventually decided the best path would be to cancel the genjutsu and force their opponents into the open where they could fight.

It took a couple minutes after Sakura had done away with the illusion before the enemy showed up, making her think one, that they wanted to tire them out before attacking, and two, that they
were terrible ninja if they couldn’t tell immediately when their genjutsu was ended.

They came out of the trees, literally. The Mist ninja was crawling out of surrounding trees and the ground around them. Sakura had read about this technique. She could even use it herself. The user of the Kasumi jusha no jutsu would create a large variety of clones that could phase in and out of the ground. Any weapons the real enemies threw would be hidden in the illusionary ones of the mist servants. That meant they would have to block or dodge every single weapon thrown because there was no way to recognize the illusionary weapons from the real ones.

Naruto charged before Sakura could tell him not to. His fist destroyed the left side of the clone he had punched, but the clone simply reformed itself, launching a double bladed kunai at Sasuke.

Naruto went to attack again but was stopped by Sasuke’s shout. The dark haired boy had activated his Kekkei Genkai. “Don’t, Naruto. They’re all clones. This is a genjutsu.”

“Sasuke’s right. The real enemy is hidden somewhere, attacking with the clones so that it will seem like they’re the ones attacking.” Sakura said. She knew they were at a major disadvantage. The real enemy was safely hidden, using the clones as a shield to attack them. Until they pinpointed where the caster of the jutsu was and took care of him, all they could do was dodge.

So that’s what they did. As the sun blazed across the sky, Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura dodged their hidden enemy’s attacks. As the night wore on they tired, stumbling and taking more hits. Exhaustion was starting to set in. Soon, Sakura knew, the real enemy would reveal himself. She just had to keep dodging until then.

“Argh! This is pointless!” Naruto yelled. “I’ll just make a bunch of shadow clones. If we defeat all the illusions at once, the enemy won’t be able to throw kunai, because they’ll be found while the clones are reforming!

“Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!” A hundred Naruto clones exploded into action, tearing through the illusionary enemy.

Sakura gaped in amazement. ‘I didn’t know he could make so many clones. This is unbelievable.’

“Psst, Sakura-chan.” The pinkette nearly jumped out of her skin when Naruto whispered into her ear. “I’m going to have a clone transform into you and Sasuke. You two hid and let me and my clones deal with this.”

She had been totally surprised by this moment of genius from Naruto. Maybe he wasn’t so bad at tactical situations after all.

They had only been hidden for a half hour before the real enemies came out into the open.

“That’s enough, Mubi. The sun is rising. It’s time to go for the kill.” The mist servants all disappeared as the jutsu was finally ended.

“You’re trapped rats.”

The three Mist ninja spun around. Sakura and Sasuke had stepped out of the bushes behind them. “When? How?”

They looked back at the three gennin that had collapsed on the ground. The Sakura and Sasuke on either side of Naruto had reverted back to their original appearance and before them stood three Narutos.

“The Kage Bunshin was just a trick! It was a diversion while I became the whole team!”
“The moment Naruto released the jutsu the two of us hid.” Sasuke continued the explanation.

Naruto fell to his knees. “You’ve used too much chakra, Naruto. Let us handle it from here.” Sakura told him.

Sakura slammed her hands into the ground. “Doton: Shinjuu Zansh!”

Three pale hands gripped the Mist ninjas’ ankles and dragged them into the ground. Naruto and Sasuke turned to look at her, both wearing different looks. Sasuke looked annoyed that she had stolen his moment, but she honestly didn’t care because he was talking too much. Naruto looked put out that Sakura got the last move. He had wanted so badly to sock the real one in the face.

Three Sakura clones broke through the ground. One had a heaven scroll in hand.

“When did you make three clones, Sakura-chan?” Naruto asked.

“When we first hid. I sent them underground to wait.” She threw the scroll at Sasuke. “We don’t need this one. Burn it.”

He glared at her for ordering him around but he set the scroll on fire. That was one less team that would pass this part of the exam.

-GENNIN-

Sakura jerk herself upright when she realized she had almost fallen asleep again.

She and the rest of her team were currently taking cover under the upraised roots of a large tree. Her eyes fell on her two unconscious teammates. She replaced the clothes on their foreheads with new ones she soaked with water from her canteen.

Naruto was still unconscious from chakra exhaustion. Sasuke had somehow managed to get bit by a poisonous snake. His face was even paler than normal, contrary to the raging fever he had. She would let them rest for another hour in hopes that Naruto would come around and help her with Sasuke. If not she would use clones to move them closer to the tower.

However, she really hoped Naruto woke up soon. She didn’t think she’d be able to handle it if they were attacked while she was the only one that could fight. She was weary from keeping watch all night.

“Heh, up all night?”

Sakura snatched up a kunai. How did people keep sneaking up behind her like this? When she got out of her she would have to learn more about hiding and sensing chakra, because this was starting to get ridiculous.

It was the team of sound ninja. The one in front reminded her of Zabuza, only with more clothes and no hair. The girl was tall and had longer hair than she did. The third member of their team was resting on a tree root. His hair stuck up kind of like Kakashi-sensei’s.

“Looks like we hit the jackpot with this one, Dosu.” The guy on the tree root said.

“Yes. It’s just one girl. Her teammates are down for the count. Get rid of her and take her scroll quickly,” the female said.

Sakura mentally reviewed all the jutsu she knew, looking for one that would let her deal with these three as quickly as possible without too much chakra.
“Doton: Doryūheki!” A wall of earth sprang to life behind her, blocking Naruto and Sasuke from view and protecting them. Now she could fight without worrying about a stray attack getting her teammates.

Sakura attacked first, forming Water Needles.

The unnamed male jumped in front of Dosu, both arms outstretched. She could she a single hole in the middle of each palm. The guy released a gust of pressurized air which repelled her needles. Dosu ran out from behind him, pulling up the sleeve of his right arm.

His lower arm was covered in some sort of arm guard with holes in it. She was blasted onto her back by a sonic wave. She stumbled as she tried to get back onto her feet.

‘What happened to my sense of balance?’ she thought as all three Sound ninja smirked at her.

As she managed to get her feet under her, Sakura realized that she wouldn’t be able to use her Water Needle attack. Not only was she swaying and seeing the enemy in triplicate, but the skinny guy would be able to repel any singular attacks directed at one person with those weird holes in his hand.

And considering the fact that she wouldn’t know which version to aim at, such an attack would be useless. What she needed was a large scale attack that would hit all of them and wouldn’t be easily blocked.

The team of Sound ninja just stood in front of her. They were clearly under the impression that she would no longer be able to fight after that attack. Sakura punched her fist into the ground.

“Doton: Dosekiryū!”

They all leapt backwards as a giant mudslide came rolling towards them. Seeing as the ground wasn’t safe, they took to the trees.

“So, you’ve still got fight. Let’s see how you deal with this, pinky.”

Sakura had to stop her jutsu to roll away from the jet of pressurized air that had been shot at her. Smoke rose from the tree it hit. The attack had drilled two holes through the tree. She didn’t even want to imagine what would have happened had the jutsu connected with her.

The pink haired girl decided to use the jutsu Kakashi-sensei had taught her upon their return to the Leaf Village.

“Suiton: Suiryūben!”

An orb of water that she could move formed in the air. A dozen sharp whips of water emerged and shot towards the ninja crouching safely in the trees. Sakura used her chakra to direct it. The whips changed trajectory with every move her opponents made. She kept up the Water Dragon Whip technique until she had forced them out of the trees and onto the ground.

They kept their distance from her, trying to regain their breath. They never would have believed that a pink haired brat could have forced them to actually fight.

Sakura having wasn’t going to give them a second to compose themselves and launch a counterattack.

“Doton: Arijigoku no Jutsu!”
The ground between Sakura and the Sound ninja collapsed in on itself, dragging the ground surrounding it down with it. The Sound ninjas, unprepared for such an attack, were sucked into the jutsu. Only Sakura was unaffected due to the chakra in her feet sticking her to the ground.

She stopped the jutsu when all three were buried up to their shoulders.

She moved to stand in front of Dosu, who seemed to be the leader of the team. “I’m going to release your upper body. When I do so you are going to give me any scrolls you have. If you make any move I deem threatening, I will completely bury you underground and leave you to suffocate. Understood?”

Left with no other choice, Dosu nodded. Sakura let him partially out of the jutsu. He slowly reached for the pouch on his left hip and pulled out an Earth Scroll. Sakura nearly danced in delight. She took it from him and put it in her weapons pouch.

She activated the Earth Release: Antlion Prison Technique again, trapping Dosu in the ground again.

She screamed in pain when his hand wound itself into her hair and pulled her head backwards. The son of a bitch was trying to drag her into her own jutsu! Sakura blinked tears of pain out of her eyes and scrambled for a kunai. She swung it randomly behind her head.

The kunai cut through her pink locks easily. The grip on her hair disappeared and she was able to ease the pain in her neck by pulling her head upright.

Sakura lowered the rock wall that had been shielding her teammates and packed up her supplies. A quick look at Sasuke’s ankle told her that she needed to move fast. The bite wound was red and inflamed; his ankle had swollen to twice its normal size. He needed medical attention fast.

She created three clones, two to carry Naruto and one to help her carry Sasuke, and beat a quick retreat from the area. She didn’t want to be anywhere near here when those three managed to escape her earth prison.

Despite the exhaustion she felt, Sakura never stopped moving. The only thought on her mind was reaching the safety of the tower. Any decision she made to stop and rest could mean the chance for another team to attack and delay her, and she couldn’t afford that in her condition. She wouldn’t be able to fight at all. And it meant longer before Sasuke could be seen to.

It was the early hours of the night when the tower appeared in the distance. Sakura, with a burst of adrenaline she didn’t know she had, sprinted to the tower’s doors.

The room she entered was empty except for the writing on the wall.

Sakura set her two unconscious teammates on the ground gently and turned to examine the scroll on the wall. She figured it was part of the second exam because there was nobody there to greet them when she entered.

“If you do not possess Heaven,” she read, “gain knowledge and be prepared. If you do not possess Earth, run through the fields and seek strength. If you open both Heaven and Earth scrolls, dangerous paths turn into safe paths. This is the secret of something, something. It shall lead you on your way.

‘But it looks like it missing words. It’s probably referring to the scrolls. I think it means for me to open them.’

Sakura fished both scrolls out of her weapons pouch and created another clone so she could open
the Heaven and Earth scrolls at the same time.

The scrolls immediately started releasing smoke. ‘A Summoning Jutsu!’ Sakura mentally screamed. This meant the second exam wasn’t over yet. She threw the scroll away and took a defensive stance before her fallen teammate.

The smoke cleared. Sakura tightened her grip on her kunai. “You’re…”

“Long time no see, Sakura-chan.” Kakashi sensei grinned underneath mask. “I’m so proud of you three for making it this far. I didn’t think you would finish this early.”

Then Kakashi seemed to realize the condition his cute students were in. Sakura was the only one of his students in the world of the living, and she was standing on wobbly feet, exhaustion clearly written in the tight, drawn lines on her face, and dried blood trailed down the right side of her face from her ear.

Both Naruto and Sasuke were unconscious. He wasn’t quite sure what was wrong with the spikey blonde haired boy, but Sasuke was clearly in pain. His facial muscles were pulled tight in a grimace.

“What happened, Sakura?” He listened patiently as she explained that Naruto had collapsed over a day ago from chakra exhaustion and had yet to awaken. She told how Sasuke had somehow managed to get bitten by a poisonous snake. She briefly mentioned having to fight a team from Sound to protect them both. He had a feeling she wasn’t telling him everything about her fight, but he let it go and helped her bring her teammates inside the tower where they could get medical attention for Sasuke.

-SAKURA-

Sakura spent the fourth day of the exam catching up on sleep. Naruto and Sasuke had been seen to and the medical ninja said they would both be fine, so Sakura finally allowed herself to relax.

When she awoke, she found both boys seated at her bedside. Apparently Kakashi-sensei had repeated her summary of what happened after the second day to them. Sasuke, even if it seemed somewhat grudging, thanked her for saving his life. Not that she thought he would have died from that snake bite, just suffered a lot of pain until it was properly treated. Naruto had congratulated her on winning the fight against the Sound ninja and getting the scroll they needed to pass this part of the exam.

Naruto’s first question had not been the expected ‘how exactly did you manage to take on those three Sound ninja all by yourself, Sakura-chan?’ but ‘what happened to your hair, Sakura-chan?’ she lied and said she had to cut it because it got tangled in some brambles. She didn’t want to admit her long hair had almost got her caught in her own jutsu.

Sakura used the extra time they had since they had gotten to the tower early to study the genjutsu scroll she had brought with her. She wasn’t going to practice in a tower full of enemy ninja, but she could at least learn the theory behind it.

She was glad when the exam ended the next day. She didn’t fancy the idea of a third part of the exam, but Kakashi-sensei had told them to prepare for it with the motto of a chuunin in mind. He had explained the scroll that had been hanging on the wall and filled in the missing words when they all awoke. She already knew that she had to improve her stamina. It was why she was doing the insane and willingly training with Gai-sensei.

All the gennin that had passed the second portion of the chuunin exams gathered in a large arena.
Standing in the front of the arena was the Hokage, the proctors of the first two exams; a jounin, Sakura guessed would proctor the third exam which was probably about to start if he was present, and the jounin senseis of each team that passed.

Sakura turned her head to look at the rows of gennin to her right as the Hokage congratulated them on passing the second part of the chuunin selection exams. The first team from her right was from Konoha. She was glad Gai-sensei’s team had made it through. It would have been disappointing if they hadn’t. Next in line was Kabuto’s team, and then the team from the Sand Village. On the far right was the Sound team she had beaten in the forest. To her left were the other two teams that made up the rookie nine.

“Before we begin the third test I will tell you one more thing.” The third Hokage said. “This is not just a test. This is a life risking battle with your dreams and your village’s prestige on the line.”

Another man spoke up. “As the referee from here on, will you allow me to explain?”

The Hokage nodded his consent to the man. Sakura thought he looked rather sickly. He proved when he coughed every sentence.

“Before the third test, there’s something I’d like you to do. It’s a preliminary for the third test, to decide who gets to participate in the main event.”

‘Preliminary?’ Sakura questioned. “Why aren’t all the people here allowed to participate in the last part of the exams.”

“Because the first two exams were too easy this year.” Sakura mentally scoffed. Why did they keep insisting this year’s exam was easy? “We have a bit too many people remaining. According to chuunin exam rules, we must have a preliminary and reduce the number of participants for the third test.

“So those who are not feeling up to it may quit now, because we are starting the preliminaries immediately.”

Kabuto was the only one to quit. Hayate gave a last call and then began to explain how the preliminaries would work.

“The preliminaries will consist of one on one fighting. You will basically fight as if in a real life confrontation. Now that we have exactly 20 contestants, we will conduct ten matches and the winners will move on to the third test.

“There are basically no rules. The fight continues until one of you dies or is knocked out or admits defeat. But when I decided that the winner has been clearly established I’ll jump in and stop things, since we don’t want to pointlessly increase the amount of corpses.”

‘Was that supposed to be a joke?’

A wooden panel above the giant statue in the shape of a hand sign moved upward to reveal an electronic scoreboard. “This electronic scoreboard will show the match-ups for each battle. Now, let’s announce the two names of the first fight.”

Sakura watched names flash on the screen, finally settling on Sakura Haruno vs. Dosu Kinuta. So she would be fighting first. And against him too. She had already experienced his attack first hand in the Forest of Death. She knew that he attacked using sound waves. She wondered how she would beat him this time. She had found no way to block his attack and he had already seen she was capable of water and earth style ninjutsu.
“Now, these two entrants come to the front. The two participants in the first fight are Sakura Haruno and Dosu Kinuta. Are you ready?”

Both replied in the affirmative. Dosu was glaring at her with one eye. Sakura got the distinct feeling that he was not happy with her earth prison jutsu.

“We will now be starting the first match. Will everyone except the two participants move to the upper level?” Hayate coughed.

All the other gennin and their senseis made their way to the second level to watch the fight. Team 7 was worried about Sakura. None of them had actually seen her fight the mummy guy and they were afraid that she might lose this battle.

Sakura knew she had to end this battle quickly before Dosu got the chance to use that weird device on his arm. If he hit her with that and damaged her ear, it was over for her. She wouldn’t be able to fight him like she did in the forest in this enclosed space.

Her first move was Earth Release: Earth Style Wall. He had already seen her use this jutsu. She would let him think that the few jutsus she used in the forest were all she knew. Unless he had been looking at Kabuto’s ninja information cards, he wouldn’t know about her ability for genjutsu.

-KAKASHI-

Kakashi didn’t even bother to pretend to be interested in his Icha Icha book. He was probably one of three in the stadium that actually believed that Sakura could win.

“Doton: Doryūheki!” A rock wall sprung to life in front of Sakura blocking her from view. Kakashi could instantly tell that neither of the two Sakuras that ran out from behind the wall was the real one, but they fooled the mummy look-a-like.

Kakashi was actually pretty sure that they were both earth clones like the ones she had used to carry Naruto and Sasuke to the tower. He could also sense the genjutsu the second she cast it. He wondered just when she had the time to learn the Demonic Illusion: Double False Surroundings technique. Whatever she had made Dosu see he didn’t believe, because he canceled the first layer immediately. But he didn’t seem to notice that there was a genjutsu still in place.

Kakashi applauded her for using the wall not only as a barrier to block his devastating sound wave attack, but also as an object to obstruct his line of sight so he couldn’t see her creating both earth clones and regular clones and casting the genjutsu.

As he watched Sakura fight, Kakashi never imagined when he was assigned his team that the pink haired Sasuke fangirl would be the one to improve the most. During the first few weeks of training he had, admittedly he thought feeling guilt curl in his stomach, favored the two males. He had believed that their strong wills and unbreakable determination gave them the potential to go far in the ninja world. And he couldn’t help but think his female student would be stuck behind a desk for her entire ninja career.

But, watching her outmaneuver a gennin older, stronger, and crueler than her, Kakashi was glad she was a part of his team. Now that he knew what she was capable of, he believed Team 7 would go on to become legendary in the ninja world, just like the legendary sannins.

Sakura’s fight ended with her victory. Until the very end where she had trapped the Sound ninja in the Headhunter jutsu, he had never realized he was still in a genjutsu.

-GENNIN-
Sakura grinned happily when the proctor announced her the winner. Just by looking at the watching crowd, she could tell that only her three senseis believed her capable of winning. Everyone else thought the poor little pink haired girl was going to be crushed by one of the strongest ninja left in this competition. But she had showed them.

She went to the upper level to watch the rest of the preliminary matches with her team, quite glad she had gone first. Now she wouldn’t have to wait and bite her nails worrying about who she was going to be paired up with.

The rosette reached her teammates. Naruto glomped her in a bear hug and spun her around in circles, yelling at the top of his lungs. Kakashi-sensei rescued her, setting her on her feet. He ruffled her hair and gave her his signature one eye smiled that said he was proud of her. Even Sasuke, still mad that she had finished the second exam for him, awarded her a small smile.

Sakura leaned against the railing as the examiner had another coughing fit. Then the names started flashing again.

Fear gripped her gut as she read the two names it had stopped on. Tenten vs. Gaara. The red head was going to kill her friend. She had heard from Kiba and his team about the fight between the Sand ninja and a team of Grass ninja that they had witness. Gaara had enveloped them with sand and crushed them.

Gaara transported to the floor of the arena in a swirl of sand, glaring up at Tenten. Tenten was engaged in a whispered fight amongst her teammates. Sakura guessed they wanted her to forfeit, and that Tenten was being stubborn and foolish, wishing to fight.

Tenten ignored all three males and vaulted over the railing, landed in a crouch before Gaara and the proctor. Sakura swore the red head’s jade eyes darkened a shade.

The match started and the bun headed girl immediately launched onto the offensive. Gaara made no move to defend himself against the oncoming projectiles. And apparently he didn’t have. As soon as the kunais were in front of him his sand flew up to block them. He hadn’t moved at all, not even to make a hand sign.

‘It’s like the sand has a will of its own.’ Sakura wondered how that could be. It was the only thing that made sense as she watched it block Tenten’s weapons at every turn, even when she tried to direct them with wire.

Kunais with explosion tags attached had no effect either. The sand completely blocked Gaara from the blast.

Tenten tried her Twin Rising Dragon technique. Sakura thought maybe she intended to overwhelm the Sand ninja with weapons in hopes that larger numbers meant one or two would slip through his defense.

They didn’t. Gaara was starting to look a combination of bored and annoyed. It was very easy for Sakura to tell, even though his face was blank, because she saw Sasuke wear the same look many times already.

It seemed Tenten could tell as well. Or maybe she realized she couldn’t beat him, because she raised her hand and forfeited. Although disappointed her only female friend hadn’t made it through, Sakura was glad because she wasn’t dead.

The third match was Naruto vs. Kiba Inuzuka.
It went down like nothing she could have expected. It started with the brunette male throwing Naruto across the room. Sakura hadn’t even seen him move. Everyone had believed Naruto to be down for the count, so of course he stood up just to prove them all wrong.

Naruto said some things with pissed Kiba off. Kiba and Akamaru attacked, using a cloud of smoke to blind the blonde ninja and take him by surprise. Naruto was knocked to the floor again by the dog, which turned around and bit Kiba’s arm.

The dog was actually a henged Naruto. A shadow clone was holding the real Akamaru. Kiba fed his canine companion a soldier pill. The dog’s fur turned red and he struggled out of Naruto’s grip. Kiba used his clan’s jutsu, Jūjin Bunshin, and Akamaru turned into a clone of Kiba.

Both Kibas attacked, equally animalistic. Sakura couldn’t tell which one was human and which one was the dog. Now they were even faster. Kiba and Akamaru in his Man Beast clone form were throwing Naruto around like a rag doll.

“Piercing Fang!” Kiba yelled. The two Kibas spiraled armd Naruto, bashing him from all sides.

“Get up, Naruto!” Sakura yelled. ‘All these people are finally acknowledging you, just like you wanted. Don’t give up here, Naruto.’

Naruto climbed to his feet, making a speech about how he was going to be Hokage. Kiba used his Piercing Fang attack again, and when the smoke cleared there were three Kibas standing. Naruto had transformed into Kiba. Now he would be able to attack both Kiba and Akamaru and they couldn’t attack him on the chance that they might be attacking their partner.

“Henge won’t work!” Kiba yelled, punching another version of himself, “Because I can smell you, Naruto.”

The Kiba he hit slid across the ground, sprawled on his back groaning. The henge disappeared only to reveal that Kiba had hit Akamaru instead. “But . . . How?” He swung around and punched the third Kiba, which turned out to be Akamaru as well.

The first Akamaru dropped the transformation, revealing Naruto this time, who delivered a swift kick to the underside of Kiba’s chin. Kiba fell backwards, spitting out blood.

Naruto tried to perform a new special technique, Sakura wondered what technique he was talking about because she hadn’t seen him working on anything new, but Kiba used his enhanced speed to get behind Naruto so he could attack before the knuckled headed ninja had the chance to use it.

And just when it looked like Kiba was going to take Naruto out, the boy clad in an orange jumpsuit farted right into the gennin’s face. Naruto took advantage of the time Kiba was clutching his nose, eyes streaming, to make four shadow clones.

One Naruto leapt into the air. The other four surrounded Kiba and kicked him into the air with a cry of “Uzumaki!” the Naruto above Kiba brought his heel down on the brunette’s head, yelling “Naruto Rendan!”

Kiba slammed face first into the ground, spitting out more blood.


Naruto ran back up to Team 7, with the energy he seemed to never run out of, and basked in the congratulations of his teammates.

The room quieted as they waited for the names for the fourth match. Sakura was surprised to see
Sasuke’s name pop up. She never would have thought all of Team 7 would get their matches out of the way so quickly.

The second name was decided. Sasuke Uchiha vs. Hinata Hyuuga.

Sasuke jumped down, smirk clearly visible on his face. He was clearly anticipating an easy win. And Sakura couldn’t blame him. From what she had seen of Hinata, the girl was worse than she had been when they were first assigned teams.

The white eyed girl shakily made her own way down. Sasuke attacked as soon as Hayate said begin. He didn’t bother with jutsu or even activate his Sharigan. He gripped a kunai and aimed a hit to the girl’s neck with the blunt end, hoping to knock her out.

In the loudest voice Sakura had ever heard the purple haired girl use, which wasn’t saying much because she never spoke above a whisper, Hinata activated her Byakugan.

She backed away from Sasuke’s blow, falling into the standard Gentle Fist taijutsu stance of the Hyuuga clan. Sasuke’s eyes bled red as he activated his own Doujutsu. Sakura wondered how the two eye techniques would hold up against each other.

The Byakugan would let Hinata see 360 degrees and Sasuke’s chakra, but Sasuke’s Sharingan would allow him to predict her move and make it seem like she was moving slowly.

The battle ended quickly after the two preteens activated their clan’s kekkei genkai. While Hinata managed to block a handful of Sasuke’s chakra points, he was the superior fighter and could easily defeat her without ninjutsu.

The handle of a kunai to the temple had Hinata unconscious, and Sasuke was declared the winner of the fourth match. He returned to their team with a smirk on his face, and despite the fact that she loved him; Sakura wished he had fought Neji instead, because the outcome probably would have been different if the male Hyuuga had fought.

The next match was Temari vs. Ino Yamanaka. The fight was over when Sakura blinked. The proctor said begin, the sandy blonde haired girl covered the distance in a flash, took the giant metal weapon from her back, smashed it into Ino’s, and sent the platinum blonde sailing across the arena.

Sakura was starting to fear the gennin from Sand. If they were all this strong? She didn’t finish that thought. She knew, though, that she didn’t want to be pitted against any of them during the third part.

Ino was carried out on a stretcher and the next battle began. It was the last of the Sand team, Kankuro, versus Misumi Tsurugi.

Misumi’s ability creeped Sakura out. Somehow, he could stretch any part of his body. It didn’t help him. The Kankuro he was trying to strangle, he actually broke his neck, turned out to be a puppet controlled by the real Kankuro hidden in the wrappings on the puppets back.

The puppet’s arms enclosed around Misumi and Kankuro unwrapped himself. The proctor declared the match over in favor of Kankuro.

The seventh match: Neji Hyuuga vs. Kin Tsuchi.

The female of the Sound team didn’t fare well at all against the prodigy of the Hyuuga clan. Neji saw through the genjutsu cast by her bells easily with his Byakugan, and just as easily closed half of her chakra points.
Rock Lee versus Chouji Akamichi.

Lee danced his way down to the arena, glad his turn to fight had finally arrived. Sakura was surprised when it was Chouji that made the first move. Though when she actually thought about it, it wasn’t that surprising since Lee preferred to let his opponent attack first to probe their skills.

Chouji’s body expanded and his arms, legs, and head were retracted. The giant ball of Chouji tried to literally run down Lee. And it was moving much faster than Sakura would have believed the Akamichi capable of.

She knew that Chouji couldn’t touch Lee. Even with the insane amount of weights the Gai clone was wearing, he was still faster than Chouji. Lee simply jumped to the side and let Chouji bulldoze straight into a wall. The heavyweight boy staggered to his feet, clearly dizzy from his own jutsu. With his hard earned speed, Lee finished the match.

The second to last match was Yoroi Akado vs. Shikamaru Nara.

Yoroi lunged towards Shikamaru, hand glowing blue with chakra. Shikamaru dodged the punch and jumped back into the shadow of the giant statue.

“Kagemane no Jutsu.” Shikamaru’s shadow stretched and expanded, speeding across the ground to connect with his opponent’s shadow. The lazy genius stepped out of the shadows and maneuvered them both so he was standing in the middle of the arena and Yoroi stood in front of a wall.

Shikamaru reached into the weapons pouch on his hip and pulled out a single shuriken, Yoroi unwillingly copied his movements. “Now,” the genius smirked, “let’s play a game of chicken.”

He hurled his shuriken, forcing Yoroi to do the same. At the last moment Shikamaru bent backwards, causing his opponent to bash his head on the wall. Shikamaru straightened up by preforming a backwards handspring.

The final match was Shino Aburame versus Zaku Abumi.

Sakura decided, after watching Shino destroy the Sound ninja’s arms that she never wanted to fight the bug wielder. She didn’t know how he managed to do it, but his Kikaichu got inside the tubes in his hand, preventing him from using his pressurized air attacks. Then the fool decided to try it anyway with the Kikaïchu plugging both openings, and his chakra tore his arms apart from the inside.

“With this, the preliminary trials for the third exam have been completed!” The winners of the ten preliminary matches lined up before Hayate and the Hokage. “To all of you who won the right to compete in the third round test of the chuunin exams, congratulations!”

The Hokage took over to explain the third test. “As I told you before, in the main event, your matches will be seen by everybody. Each of you will fight to represent the strengths of your countries. I’d like you to show off all your powers with no reserves. Which is why the finals will be held one month from now. This break will be for preparations.

“There are pieces of paper inside the box Anko is holding, so each of you take one piece. Now then, I’d like you to tell us that number, from left to right.

“One.” Lee.

“Nine.” Neji.
“Seven.” Naruto.
“Five.” Sakura.
“Eight.” Sasuke.
“Six.” Shino.
“Three.” Shikamaru.
“Ten.” Gaara.
“Four.” Temari.
“Two.” Kankuro.

“Alright, now I will reveal to you the final tournament!”

The final part of the exam was a standard tournament. Well, semi-standard anyway. With ten competitors it was set up so that the winner of the first match had to fight an extra match. It made Sakura very happy that she had drawn the number five. Two back to back battles in front of a huge crowd that would be judging her was not her idea of fun.

She was even happier when she learned that she could be promoted to chuunin even if she lost her first match, not that she was planning to. Her first opponent was Shino. From what she had seen his Kikaichu at chakra, so she would need to fight him at a distance. She couldn’t risk losing any of her chakra to those bugs when she didn’t have much to begin with.

The Hokage finally let them go, with a final good luck to the ten finalists, and Sakura went home, very glad to be back in the comfort of her own bed after five days sleeping in the forest.

-GENNIN-

Sakura knew she had a lot of work ahead of her as she prepared for the final part of the chuunin selection exams. She needed to learn more long range jutsus, increase her chakra reserves, and keep up her training in genjutsu and taijutsu.

She was waiting on the bridge for Kakashi-sensei along with Naruto and Sasuke. She still couldn’t believe all of Team 7 had made it to the finals. Just thinking about the tournament made Sakura anxious. Naruto and Sasuke would be fighting each other in the first round, and the intensity of their rival made her worry. One of them would have to lose, and the loser would probably be bitter. Or at least Sasuke would be if he was to one to lose.

It also made her wonder what Kakashi-sensei would do about their training. There was no way he could train both Naruto and Sasuke, and it would be completely unfair for him to pick one over the other. She briefly thought that he would train her, so as to not favor one boy over the other, but she dismissed that thought quickly. Even if she did win her first match, there was no way she would get to the end of the tournament. Kakashi-sensei would just be wasting his time if he focused on her training. So maybe he would find someone else to train all three of them for the next month.

She learned she was half right when Kakashi-sensei finally arrived, actually five hours late today. He would not train either Naruto or Sasuke (who hn’ed and said he was training with his father and brother), but he would be training her. It wasn’t all day every day because he also had arranged for Sakura to learn the basics of medical ninjutsu.
That decision had surprised the pinkette and made her think. She had never considered training to become a medical ninja before. She thought it was stupid to not have considered it by now. She wanted to help Sasuke in any way possible, and if she were to become a medical ninja she could certainly do that. Then Sakura would always be able to heal any injuries she might have. And it would help the overall success rate of her team.

And so the most hectic month of Sakura’s life began.

She woke up early every morning without fail to do her basic endurance training before meeting with Gai-sensei in the morning. Sakura would have felt guilty about that, but Lee did not mind training with, as they green duo dubbed her, Konoha’s most youthful blossom, and Neji trained in secret with the assistance of Tenten.

Taijutsu was followed by genjutsu with Kurenai-sensei, when she wasn’t busy with Shino. But Shino, like Sasuke, spent most of his time training with his clan, so the genjutsu mistress was often available and willing to train her, despite Sakura being her student’s opponent.

Afternoons were spent at the hospital. The path of a medical ninja was a difficult one, but Sakura was taking to it like a fish to water.

-GENNIN-

It was Sakura’s first day of training at the hospital. She wasn’t quite sure what to expect, but it definitely wasn’t being sat down in the Head Medic’s office and given a stern talking to about the expectations of a ninja aspiring to be a medical ninja and of the many dangers that came from this profession.

“If you wish to learn medical ninjutsu I expect you to continue through with the training of a medical ninja. You can’t stop just because you think being a medical ninja is too hard. I will require absolute dedication and one hundred percent effort from you. If you cannot give me that then get out.”

The young girl swore to see this endeavor through to the end, determination burning in her eyes. The Head medic nodded acknowledgment and continued his speech.

“A medical ninja is one of the hardest professions in the shinobi world. It certainly has to be one of the most stressful. There will be no slacking in your duties. Always arrive early. If you ever come late I will terminate your training. Lives are depending on you.”

Sakura gulped. This was a huge undertaking. Was she really ready to commit herself to this? She was only twelve.

“Being a medical ninja is a dangerous profession. Since you are the one that supports a whole squad, enemy ninja will be aiming for you first. Take out the medic of the team, and the rest of the team is handicapped. That’s why there are rules that dictate a medic’s role on the team, the Medic’s Code.

“There are four clauses to the Medic’s Code. If you do not think you can follow this code, leave and don’t come back.” Dark gray eyes glared at her.

“First clause: No medic ninja shall ever stop medical treatment until the lives of their party members come to an end.

“Second clause: No medic ninja shall ever stand on the front line.

“Third clause: No medic ninja shall ever die until they are the last of their platoon.
“Fourth clause: Only those medic ninja who have mastered the Strength of a Hundred Technique and the ninja art Creation Rebirth are permitted to discard the above mentioned laws.”

While Sakura agreed that the medic was the most important member of the team, she was not going to let that stop her from being an equal member of her team. She refused to sit back and let her teammates protect her. She would learn those last two techniques so she could stand by her teammates’ sides at all times. She wouldn’t stay safe in the village working in the hospital. She would be a field medic.

-GENNIN-

In Sakura’s opinion, her medic training was the hardest to master. She had been given the task of healing a fish close to death. The Head Medic had left her to her own devices with the advice of not getting too discouraged, being a medic required effort and dedication. It was a skill that took months to develop even the basics.

But Sakura had only one month. So, when she was done in the late afternoon with her training with Kakashi-sensei, she would return to the hospital. Her pink hair had become a common site around there, and nurses and medics stopped asking her what she was doing lurking around in a hospital room.

Her Saturdays were completely taken by training with Kakashi-sensei. He was helping her increase her chakra reserves and teaching her to sense chakra signatures. Surprisingly, he was never once late to their training sessions. He was actually there before her every day.

She devoted all day Sunday to the hospital as well. She thought she had even surprised the Head Medic with her determination. He was certainly amazed at her progress each time he came to check in on her. According to him, no one since Tsunade, one of the Legendary Sannin, had ever learned this fast. Sakura thought he was exaggerating her ability because she had yet to heal the fish.

Sakura’s schedule was so busy that she never even thought about how Naruto and Sasuke were doing and if their training was progressing as well as hers. Finally, the day before the tournament had arrived. It was Sunday and Sakura was still trying to learn the Mystical Palm technique.

The Head Medic entered the room she was using to practice to check in on her progress that day and to wish her good luck in the finals. He was met with an unusual sight, at least for those that worked in the hospital.

Quiet, reserved, determined, composed, polite Sakura was dancing around the room laughing happily and loudly.

The Head Medic opened his mouth to give the rosette a dressing down on appropriate behavior while in a hospital, only to drop his jaw when the girl danced to the right and gave him a view of the fish she had been working on for the last month.

It was flopping around on the scroll! It was alive! He couldn’t believe it. A little slip of a girl with ridiculous pink locks had managed to master the first step in just one month. One month!

He dismissed the girl early, both as reward for her accomplishment and because she needed to take the time to relax before tomorrow. He had never seen anyone learn medical jutsu so quickly. After a few moments thinking, he decided to take her on as his apprentice. It wasn’t a difficult decision for him to make, for it would have been a crime for him to let that much talent and potential go untrained.
The ten finalists of the chuunin exams stood in a line behind Hayate, the proctor for the third exam. Sakura was between her two teammates, Naruto on her left and Sasuke on her right.

Behind each contender was their sensei. Aside from the Suna team, which had one jounin between the three of them, and Gai-sensei who stood between Neji and Lee, each gennin had their own. All of Sakura’s senseis had agreed that Kakashi should be the one to stand with her on this day. Kurenai-sensei stood behind Shino, an old man with long white spiky hair that Sakura recognized as Jiraiya, another one of the Legendary Sannin, was behind her blonde teammate. Sasuke’s older brother, Itachi, stood at his shoulder.

“Thanks everyone for coming to the Hidden Leaf chuunin selection exam! We will now start the main tournament matches between the ten participants that made it through the preliminaries.” The Hokage welcomed.

“Alright guys, this is the final test. The arena is different but the rules are the same as in the prelims, there are none. You fight until one of you dies or acknowledges defeat. But if I determine the fight is over I'll step in and stop it, you got that?” Hayate was still coughing.

“Now, the first fight, Rock Lee versus Kankuro. Those two stay here will the rest of you go to the waiting room. Senseis can go with the students or take a seat in the stands.”

Sakura was pleased when Kakashi-sensei followed her to the room she would be watching the tournament from. He didn’t say anything, just placed a supporting hand on her shoulder, which she was grateful for because she was sure that if she tried to speak nothing would come out.

“Now, the first fight, BEGIN!”

Sakura watched the first fight with interest. It wasn’t the best match up for Lee, a close combat fighter with no chakra, against a puppet master who could hold Lee at a distance. Then again, she knew first hand just how fast the gennin in green spandex could move.

She had to mentally correct herself the next second. Unbelievably, Lee’s already incredible speed had gotten faster in the last month. He was a blur of green and orange that her eye could only keep up with because the arena was brown.

Kankuro, however, seemed to have no problem defending against Lee’s speed. He used his puppets four detachable arms to help block Lee’s attacks from every direction. After five minutes of getting nowhere, Lee removed the weights, which Sakura wasn’t even aware he had and made her jaw drop in disbelief of how fast he was with them, he had been wearing hidden under his orange leg warmers.

The weights literally shook the ground when he dropped them, creating craters five meters across. And then he disappeared from sight.

The Sand nin had trouble at this point. He was no match for Lee’s insane speed, and he realized it too. To counter his inability to dodge, Kankuro summoned another puppet, this one much larger than the first, and hid himself inside.

Lee continued his relentless attack, but whatever wood that puppet was made of prevent Lee from shattering it to pieces and revealing the ninja hidden inside. Sakura thought its durableness most likely came from Kankuro inputting chakra to enhance its sturdiness.

Lee stopped, realizing that repeatedly attacking the puppet wasn’t getting him anywhere.
“Third Gate: Gate of Life, open!”

Next to her Kakashi stiffened, his lone eye widening in disbelief. Sakura watched Lee as green chakra surrounded him and his skin turned red.

“Fourth Gate: Gate of Pain, open!”

Kakashi-sensei’s knuckles turned white, he was gripping the railing so hard. Sakura was starting to worry about him.

“Fifth Gate: Gate of Limit, open!”

Sakura swore a blood vessel or ten burst in her silver haired sensei’s forehead. By this point Lee’s skin had gotten darker, veins erupted around his temples, and his eyes were completely white.

Impossibly, in Sakura’s opinion, Lee was moving even faster, and one punch destroyed the puppet that Kankuro had taken safety in. Before the puppeteer could summon another puppet, Lee had punched him clear across the stadium and into the stone wall. He grinned in triumph, the redness of his skin receding and his eyes returning to normal, and then he collapsed.

Hayate looked at both gennin, waiting for one to stand. When neither moved, he declared the first match a draw. Medics removed both unconscious gennin as the sick man called down the next two fighters.

Meanwhile Sakura was edging away from her sensei, who was muttering darkly under his breath about irresponsible senseis teaching gennin to open the inner gates.

The blonde kunoichi unfurled her giant fan and floated down to arena floor. Shikamaru didn’t seem to be in any hurry. Actually, Sakura thought, he looked like he just wanted to forfeit. With a little encouragement from Naruto, the lazy genius quickly made his way down to the arena. And by encouragement she meant a shove in the back that shoved Shikamaru over the railing and onto the ground at the base of the stadium wall.

Temari, seeing her opponent had no intention of getting off the ground, charged, “If you won’t come, then I will!” completely disregarding the proctor’s protest about not having started the match yet.

The kunoichi slammed the metal butt of her fan down at Shikamaru’s head, raising a cloud of dirt. The dirt settled to reveal Shikamaru standing on two kunai he had thrown at the wall. “Ya know, I don’t really want to fight, and I don’t really care if I become a chuuunin or not, but I’m not about to lose to a girl.”

Sakura wasn’t the only one offended by that remark if she was reading the blonde’s face correctly. Sakura silently vowed to find the Nara once this was all over and kick his ass.

Temari opened her fan all the way and swung it in Shikamaru’s direction. It created a large gust of wind, but Shikamaru was no longer standing on the kunai, having taken refuge behind one of the few trees in the arena.

Temari held her fan in front of her with one had at the base. “Kamaitachi no Jutsu!” The wind sliced through the trees Shikamaru had taken shelter in, tearing holes into his shirt and giving him a few superficial cuts.

Sakura watched closely, cursing all the dirt the wind user’s attack overturned for blocking her vision, waiting for something to happen.
She didn’t have to wait long, as the weapon wielder gained a look of horror on her face and jumped backwards three times, chased by Shikamaru’s Kagemane no Jutsu. The shadow fell short and the girl drew a line in the ground with her fan to mark the extent of the male’s jutsu.

“Looks like there’s a limit to how much you can stretch, shrink and change the shape of your shadow, isn’t there?” she asked, smirking. “No matter how much you change and stretch the shape of your shadow, you still can’t stretch it any further than the surface area of your normal shadow, that right?”

“That’s right,” Shikamaru chuckled, crouching and putting his fingertips together, arms bent at the elbows and thumb on top. After half a minute of thinking he opened his eyes, reaching his left arm back into his weapons pouch.

Temari moved first, using her Kamaitachi no Jutsu again. Shikamaru took cover behind a tree. A kunai came flying out towards Temari, who easily blocked with her fan. The shadow came out again, but this time, to the blonde’s shock, it went passed the line she had already drawn.

Sakura reasoned that Shikamaru had tried to waste time to increase the length of both his own shadow and that of the wall’s in order to catch the girl by surprise when it went further than she expected.

This time Shikamaru did not immediately release his jutsu. Temari focused her eyes on the ground, watching Shikamaru’s shadow and thinking hard about something. She was so engrossed in her thinking that she didn’t notice the shadow that appeared on the ground in front of Shikamaru’s extended one.

Before the girl could react, Shikamaru’s shadow had connected with the new one and shot out the other side, connecting with Temari’s shadow and trapping her in the genius’s Kagemane no Jutsu.

Shikamaru had attached his shirt to a kunai with his headband to make a make shift parachute in order to create the shadow he needed to give him that little bit of extra distance.

“Finally, Kagemane no Jutsu, success!”

Shikamaru walked forward out of the wall’s shadow, forcing Temari to walk to the middle of the arena with him.

“Kage–Kubishibari no Jutsu.” A shadow in the shape of a hand reached up and wrapped its dark fingers around Temari’s throat. Faced with Shikamaru’s shadow strangle jutsu, the female ninja forfeited.

Kakashi placed a hand on her shoulder, causing the pinkette to look up questioningly at her sensei. He gave her a one eyed smile. “You’ll be fine, Sakura-chan.”

Sakura took a depth breath and followed the quiet bug user down. Kakashi-sensei’s faith in her bolstered her spirits.

Neither gennin wasted any time once the proctor allowed them to begin. Shino raised his arms and a mass of writhing bugs flew at her. Sakura implemented the plan she had been working on since the preliminaries had ended and her opponent for the finals had been chosen.

“Earth Release: Earth Dome jutsu!”

The barrier of earth sprung around her, completely blocking the pink haired girl from the
Aburame’s Kikaichu. She knew she had to move fast because the bugs fed off of chakra and would soon eat through her earth dome.

“Doton Kage Bunshin.” She was glad the rock barrier between her and Shino would prevent him from hearing which jutsus she was using.

“Doton: Moguragakure no Jutsu.” The Earth Style: Hiding Like a Mole technique which Kakashi-sensei had taught her worked perfectly and Sakura was able to burrow into the ground. The Earth Style Shadow Clone she left behind would distract and confuse Shino long enough for her to launch her surprise attack.

Sakura waited until she felt her earth dome jutsu falter, signaling that the Kikaichu had eaten their way through and were no focused on her clone before she attacked.

She released her Hiding Like a Mole jutsu and came up behind Shino. Before the bug wielder could react to her sudden appearance, Sakura had him trapped.

“Suirō no Jutsu!”

Sakura spat out a stream of water which formed a ball around Shino. Now that he was in her water prison jutsu, he wouldn’t be able to use chakra. She was so glad she had taken the time to learn this jutsu after Zabuza had used it on Kakashi-sensei. It had to be the only way to defeat an Aburame.

Hayate ended the match, declaring Sakura the winner. She released her jutsu and her and Shino returned to the viewing deck. Kakashi-sensei had ruffled her hair again. Sakura was beginning to think he did it on purpose because he knew it annoyed her.

Naruto barely had the time to offer her congratulations before he was called for his fight with Sasuke.

Sakura had to restrain herself from biting her nails as cerulean blue eyes clashed with dark onyx eyes. Naruto extended his right arm, hand clenched in a fist; Sasuke mimicked him. And then they bumped fists. That was when Sakura let out a sigh of relief. This was just going to be another spar between them. A match between rivals.

The pinkette relaxed her posture and got ready to enjoy the fourth match, wondering who would come out on top this time. The two of them had fought so many times, but the record of wins and losses was pretty even. Sasuke was faster than Naruto. He had better aim and could strategize, which Naruto seemed incapable of. Naruto, however, had numbers on his side, along with his creativity, ability to think on the fly, and his pure stubbornness. Sakura had no way of predicting who would win this fight.

Her teammates put on an impressive display. Sasuke’s control of fire jutsu had gotten even better, and he had shown off some basic lighting based jutsus as well. Naruto had gotten faster, he could now keep up with the dark haired boy, and he had learned some wind jutsus. He even used them tactically to his advantage.

The fight devolved into hand to hand combat, and from there into a whaling match. They were literally trying to just beat the crap out of each other, and they were doing a good of it. Splotches of black and blue bruises bloomed into existence any time they landed a hit.

In a plume of smoke, Naruto exploded from one Naruto to one hundred. As he charged Sasuke, who easily managed to defend himself with use of his Sharingan, Sakura got the feeling that her two boys weren’t actually aiming to win the match, but use the other’s skills to best show off their
own.

The smirks on their faces only made her more confident of her theory. ‘They probably planned this since they and drawn numbers.’

The fight continued to grow in intensity, the two males of Team 7 completely dazzling the audience with their display of power. After ten minutes of showcasing new skills they had worked on for the last month, both Naruto and Sasuke stopped.

They stood facing the other with only 10 meters between them. Silence reigned in the stadium as they waited to see who would move first.

“Teme.”

“Dobe.”

Sakura face palmed. Of course they had to insult each other. It wasn’t an official fight between them if they didn’t.

“Let’s finish this.”

“One final attack.”

“Right.”

“Aa.”

And then they charged. The distance between them was eaten up quickly. Fists were drawn back. Both ducked under the incoming attack and spun around, placing a kunai at the other’s throat.

There was absolute silence. Then Naruto laughed loudly and Sasuke chuckled. Hayate ended the match in a draw.

Sakura wondered how the second round of the tournament would work with three competitors. Would it became a three way battle, or would one of them get a bye into the final round?

Naruto and Sasuke had rejoined her and Kakashi-sensei. The blonde was grinning broadly with his hands behind his head. The raven haired male had his hands in his pockets.

“You two planned for that.” Sakura asked, although it sounded more like a statement.

Sasuke’s lips quirked up slightly at one end and Naruto’s grin turned sheepish, confirming her suspicions. She shook her head fondly; of course those two would rig a battle of the chuunin selection exams.

The final match of the first round had gone nothing like Sakura had expected.

Of course she knew it was a battle of who had the greatest defense. Neji attacked the blood red haired boy with his Gentle Fist, and when he was blocked by the sand the responded instinctively he was blocked by the armor of sand Gaara wore. Gaara would send tendrils of sand to slap at the Hyuuga, but he skillfully dodged and weaved his way between them, and when he couldn’t he rotated and expelled chakra from his chakra points creating a shield of pure chakra that the sand couldn’t get through.

This was a battle of intelligence and defense, and to be quite honest, it bored Sakura to watch a whole fight based on defending in the same manner repeatedly.
That was when chaos descended.

The red head formed the ram seal. “Tanuki Neiri no Jutsu.”

‘What? He’s putting himself into an induced sleep? Why?’

That question was answered when what could only be described as a monster took form. It was a sandy brown color with black markings all over its face, body, and really huge tail that was slamming into the stadium wall. The majority of its eyes were black and the pupil was yellow.

The monster let out a roar. Gaara, she could see, was on top of the beast’s head.

“Sakura, go after them!” her sensei ordered.

‘Go after who?’ she thought. Naruto and Sasuke were running down the stadium wall towards that damn beast that could kill them mindlessly with a swish of its tail. ‘Those idiots!’

Sakura, Itachi, and Kakashi-sensei all took off at the same time. Sakura down the wall, chasing after her two idiots of teammates that she was going to murder when this was all over, and her sensei and the Uchiha towards the Hokage’s battle on the rooftop.

She reached her teammates, who were having no success attacking the giant clawed feet, and promptly slammed her fists into their skulls. Not that she thought they did any damage. The two of them had very thick skulls or else they wouldn’t have literally ran head on into this situation.

“Are you two crazy? Don’t answer that. It was a rhetorical question.” She snapped when Naruto opened his mouth to refute her. “If you were actually planning on fighting this thing you should have attacked Gaara. End his sleeping jutsu and whatever the hell this thing is will disappear.”

“Get lost all of you. This is my fight.”

Sakura stared in disbelief at Neji. She had actually forgotten he was fighting Gaara when that monster appeared. Was he serious? There was no way he could beat this thing on his own.

“Just who the hell do you think you are, you bastard!” Naruto yelled. “You can’t fight Gaara on your own.”

The Hyuuga leveled them with a cool look. “The proctor has not called this match as over, therefore, it is still my battle. Do not interfere.”

‘He was serious,’ Sakura thought weakly.

Naruto didn’t agree with that answer. He nailed Neji right in the face, and giving that there was a loud crack, broke his nose. “You’re going to need help if you’re going to take this thing down.” He said, gesturing to the monster that was systematically destroying the stadium behind them.

“I will not. I was destined to fight Gaara.” Neji said thickly. Sakura was surprised his voice didn’t come out muffled or unintelligible. She guessed a Hyuuga was always dignified, even if he did have a broken nose.

“What does fate have anything to do with this?” asked Naruto. He didn’t wait for an answer from the brunette, instead turning to face his teammates. “So, how are we going to do this?”

He had directed the question at her, but Sasuke chose that moment to finally speak up. “Dobe, you and I will climb up there and wake up the sand ninja. Sakura, you stay here.”
Sakura gaped at his demand as he and Naruto ran up the monster’s leg. How on earth could he expect her to just stand here while they were in danger? Never mind that she could be crushed if the monster ever moved its feet.

The beast let out another loud roar, this time accompanied by chakra. A section of the stands was blown apart, completely destroyed by the blast of chakra enhanced air.

Sakura watched unbelieving as her teammates scaled the beast and it never noticed them. They had reached his chest before it had finally realized there were two people running up him.

The beast stared at them with beady yellow eyes as if unable to comprehend what he was seeing.

“Sand Shuriken!” the monster’s voice was higher pitched than she imagined, and when it growled she wanted to laugh. The desire was lost when thousands of shurikens made of sand were launched from the beast’s arm. There were way too many for Naruto and Sasuke to dodge, and they seemed never ending.

Sakura knew she had to do something. She couldn’t just stand here like a civilian when her teammates were in danger. With Kakashi-sensei’s words echoing in her mind ‘a ninja who breaks the rules is scum, but a ninja who abandons his comrades is worse than scum,’ Sakura scaled the beast herself, determined to be of help to Naruto and Sasuke.

She finally reached them; they had stopped their ascent to block the sand shurikens before they were impaled. “Suiton: Teppōo!” A wave of water gushed out of her mouth. It made the sand heavier. The water logged sand was too dense to move quickly, and it allowed Sakura to grab her two teammates and haul them up to the monster’s shoulder.

Sasuke brushed her arm off violently. “What are you doing, Sakura? I told you to stay down there.” He glared at her. Sakura ignored him, more concerned with reaching Gaara and waking him up than with his being upset at her.

Naruto also seemed to be focusing on the issue at hand. He made twenty shadow clones and used them to throw himself at Gaara. It didn’t work as, unfortunately, even in this state the boy’s sand defended him without his direction.

The sand stirred itself into a frenzy, making it impossible to get within five meters of the red head. Then what seemed to be difficult became insane. A sand clone of Gaara rose into existence next to the real one. It glared at the three of them. Apparently, it was going to do everything possible to keep them away from the real Gaara and prevent them from ending his Feigned Sleep jutsu.

The sand clone proceeded to attack, drawing Sasuke and Naruto into a three way battle. Sakura didn’t know whether to thank Kami for the stroke of luck or be annoyed that she clearly wasn’t considered to be a threat.

She went with thanking Kami because otherwise she would enter the fight that was out of her league and get herself killed. Besides, if the sand clone was going to conveniently forget about her, she would use it to her advantage to bash in Gaara’s skull.

And that’s exactly what Sakura did. Unnoticed by all three ninja, she walked right up to Gaara and slammed one of her fists into his forehead. His cold jade eyes snapped open to glare at her. With him awake, the sand clone disappeared, causing Naruto and Sasuke to look at Gaara and see him awake with her standing next to him.

The giant monster started to crumble into sand. Gaara, not at all pleased with the outcome of this fight, slammed a tendril of sand into all three of them, throwing them clear off the crumbling
Sakura slammed into something soft. With a groan she picked herself up to see what had broken her fall. It turns out she had landed on Naruto. A groan from beneath the blonde alerted her to Sasuke’s presence underneath them both.

The rosette quickly scurried off of Naruto and dragged his dead weight off of their teammate. Sasuke, too, was unconscious, but in pain if the blood falling down from the corner of his mouth was anything to go by.

Sakura placed her hands over his chest, using the Mystical Palm technique to diagnose his injuries. Whether from the fall itself or her and Naruto landing on him; Sasuke had broken two ribs on his right side. She hesitated to heal her dark haired teammate. She had only managed to use the Mystical Palm technique successfully for the first time yesterday. Would she be able to heal Sasuke, or would she make his injuries worse by attempting to do so?

Sakura decided she didn’t have much of a choice when he coughed up more blood. Her healing chakra flooded his body. She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do in order to speed up his body’s natural healing of broken bones. She settled for willing her chakra to knit the bone back together.

The pinkette was so focused on her jutsu, unwilling to lose her concentration and end up hurting Sasuke that she didn’t notice that crowd of ninja that had formed around Team 7. If she had the chance to look before she fell unconscious from exhaustion, she would have seen all of the Konoha gennin and their senseis, Sasuke’s parents and brother, and two members of the medical core that had been assigned to attend to injuries during the chuunin exams gaping at her.
Sakura came to with a groan.

She was greeted by the familiar walls of the hospital that she had practically lived in for the last month. On a normal day, she didn’t mind the bleach white walls, the scent of disinfectant, or the bright lights on the ceiling.

However, this was not a normal day, because today she was the patient, and not the visitor slash student. To someone who had just woken up, the absolute whiteness that was everywhere, from the lights, to the walls, to the floors, to the furniture, was blinding. Sakura was starting to understand while the older generation of shinobi hated having to go to the hospital if this is how they were treated.

Being blinded after being healed from whatever had landed you in the hospital was no fun. She also thought the enclosed space did nothing to help a ninja’s natural claustrophobia. Being trapped in a single room with a smaller than average window and only two exit routes just wasn’t safe when you were a shinobi.

Sakura had a reunion with her teammates. It had been three days since the disaster of a chuunin exams and the subsequent invasion, and she had been asleep for all three of them, which frankly shocked her because she hadn’t thought she had done anything to warrant a three day hospital visit. She could have slept at home and not have been blinded when she opened her eyes.

The reunion wasn’t the happiest one though. It turns out that the invasion had been a joint effort between the Sound Village and the Sand Village, led by Orochimaru himself. And if it wasn’t bad enough that sannins turned S-rank rogue ninjas were attacking the village, the Snake Sannin had killed the Sandaime Hokage.

Sakura, Kakashi-sensei had told her, was lucky to have woken before the funeral, which would take place tomorrow. The pinkette didn’t agree with her sensei at all.

Both of her teammates were subdued. Naruto was depressed. Until he had been put on Team 7, only the Hokage and Iruka-sensei had paid any attention to him. Well, positive attention, she corrected herself. The blonde had thought of the Third Hokage as a grandfather and she was positive he considered Naruto as a second grandson.

Sasuke was sullen because the chuunin exams had been canceled. Personally, Sakura thought that was a pretty selfish reason. Their village had been attacked, their Hokage murdered, and all he care about was his lost chance at a promotion. She knew his dream to surpass his brother was important to him, and maybe a little too much, but did Sasuke really care more for it than he did for the village they, as Konoha shinobi, were supposed to defend?

The village a shinobi belonged to was everything. Without the ties to a village, ninja were nothing more than another tool, another weapon to be directed and used on someone else’s whims. Belonging to a village allowed shinobi to maintain a sense of humanity because even harmful, evil, dirty deed they performed was for the sake of the village. Konoha was built on the Shodaime Hokage’s philosophy of the Will of Fire. Every true Konoha shinobi must love, believe, cherish and fight for the village's sake, as previous generations had done before them.

She thought, given the cross look and glare on his face that yes, he did care more for being better than his brother than he did for his village. Sasuke’s petty goal was worth more to him than his honor as a shinobi, than his village, than the Will of Fire. And it made Sakura think. Would she

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really do anything to help him achieve his dream if it meant forsaking her village in a time of need? Abandoning her morals? Her sense of right and wrong? Her duty as an inheritor of the Will of Fire?

Sakura didn’t think she could. Maybe she could offer him help if he needed it, but not to the extent that achieving his dream was the only thing she cared about.

Come to think of it, ever since she had started training seriously, she had noticed that Sasuke didn’t care what efforts he took or methods he used if it helped him reach his goal. She had tried many times over the past months to show that she would stand by him and be there if he ever needed her, but Sasuke never acknowledged her unless it made him look superior in comparison.

Her resolve to help her crush surpass Itachi was crumbling. How could she help a guy who cared about nothing else but his goal? All he had done so far was manage to hurt her by criticizing her needlessly. She already knew she was the weakest member of Team Kakashi, but that was why she had made the extra effort to fix her training. In the time since they had been placed on Team 7, only Sasuke remained unchanged. If she tilted her head at the right angle and squinted she could see the little bit of maturity that Naruto had received. But her dark haired teammate was just as cold, distant, stoic, derisive, and unapproachable as ever.

With a look as Sasuke, who was glaring at her as if blaming Sakura for the cancellation of the chunin selection exams, the pinkette knew her dream had been shattered. No longer would she improve for Sasuke’s sake. Now she would do it for her own. She would focus on her own dream, a new one. She would become the best kunoichi she could be, the best in the whole village. She would become a medical ninja that rivaled the Legendary Slug Sannin, Tsunade.

She would take the rest of the day off, whenever they got around to releasing her from the hospital, and then begin training again. She would have to practice every day if she wanted to reach Tsunade’s level.

But first, she had a funeral to attend.

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Kakashi-sensei had to bribe the nurses and doctors to let her leave the hospital for the Sandaime’s funeral. Apparently when she had healed Sasuke after their battle with Gaara, she had completely used up all of her chakra, putting her into a mini coma, and they wanted to keep her in that sickeningly white room for observation and in case she was fully recovered yet.

But her sensei had persuaded them to let her go, and also into releasing her early, so she could attend the Third Hokage’s funeral. He had even brought her a simple black kimono. She almost wondered if he had followed her home one day, because she had never told him where she lived. Then she realized that the kimono he had given her was not the one carefully tucked away in the back of her closet. She swore to pay him for it after Team 7’s next mission.

The ceremony took place on top of the Hokage tower.

A picture of the Third Hokage when he actually had color in his hair was propped up on a table, a bouquet of flowers already placed in front of it. Four candles were burning. Sakura thought they were supposed to symbolize the Will of Fire that every Konoha shinobi had, to show that it had ended for one but had been passed onto the next generation.

Every shinobi in the village was present, dressed in their finest black mourning outfits. The heavens opened and cried themselves. She listened with one ear as one of the Elders spoke the eulogy. She vaguely remembered Iruka-sensei mentioning during one lesson that the Elders were
part of the Hokage’s gennin team. Sakura wondered if they were hurting as much as the village was, or less because they didn’t get along with him anymore.

One by one shinobi approached the dais to lay down a white flower. She knew from special kunoichi only lessons during her years in the academy, although Sakura still didn’t know why any kunoichi would need a female only class in flower picking and arranging, that the white color represented innocence, humility and reverence.

It was a color she thought suited the Sandaime very well, and not just because he lived long enough to have white hair, although that was quite the accomplishment in the ninja world. While young, naïve, and innocent herself, she knew that the Hokage was not. One did not reach his position without stepping on a few, and not every decision he made was for the good of the village. There had to be a time when he made sacrifices of his shinobi for the better good of the village. But the pinkette knew the Third Hokage was as humble as they came. He often visited them during a lesson on the village’s history and Iruka-sensei would let him do the teaching for the day. The Third Hokage was an approachable person and he genuinely cared for each of his shinobi. Aside from the Yondaime, the Third Hokage was the best Hokage Konoha had had, and the whole village would be sad to lose him. He was respected and well loved by both the shinobi and the civilians.

Sakura left the ceremony subdued. A great man had just moved on. But Naruto beside her was just as bubbly and hyper as ever. Whatever Iruka-sensei had said to him had brought the spark back in his eyes. She wondered how long it would take for her life to return to normal.

‘Not too long,’ she hoped. Maybe Team 7 could find a mission. A distraction would be welcomed.

Sakura waved goodbye to her teammates and headed towards her home in the civilian district, unaware that her life would never be normal again.

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Sakura was torn when she arrived home. She didn’t know whether to be angry, hunt her teammates down in a rage and tear them apart, or to completely breakdown and cry.

The house she had grown up in was destroyed, along with her parent’s bakery. She wondered if this was why Kakashi-sensei had bought a new kimono for her. Even if he had come here to collect her own he would have been unable to do so. Sakura felt she could have handled that if her parents weren’t gone too.

‘How could they not have told me this?’ Sakura was mentally exhausted at this point. The chuunin exams, the invasion, the Hokage’s funeral, and now this. She had no clue what she was supposed to do, so she just stood, rooted to the spot, outside what had been her home for thirteen years, silent tears streaming down her cheeks. All she could think about was that her teammates had not told her that her parents were dead. They had told her everything else related to the chuunin exams.

Did they not know her parents were dead? Even though Sakura could see the evidence in front of her, she found it hard to acknowledge. In her mind they had just congratulated her on her success as a ninja. Her mother had prepared her favorite triple chocolate cake for a celebration after the exams whether she passed or not.

She didn’t know how long she stood in front of her house and parents’ bakery. Where was she supposed to go now? She had no other family, at least none that she knew of. Neither of her parents had mentioned siblings, cousins or her grandparents. Sakura began sobbing. Did she have
family somewhere else, or was she officially alone in the world?

It felt like centuries that she stood in front of her house and parents’ bakery. Night had fallen and the moon was climbing high into the sky and she stood transfixed at the ruins of her life unable to comprehend the reality that she was now alone. Sakura was now an orphan with no place to call home. Not that any could compare to the one in front of her.

The rosette shrieked when a hand rested gently on her shoulder. Reacting instinctively, she grabbed the person’s wrist and pivoted, throwing whoever had touched her over her shoulder and had settled her weight on him before he could get up.

“Shikamaru?” Sakura blinked. He was the last person she was expecting. She had thought the first people to come looking for her would be her team.

Even more surprising was the expression on his face. It wasn’t his usual ‘the devil may care this is too troublesome for me I just want to watch the clouds and sleep look.’ There was genuine concern there, which was unexpected from him. They weren’t particularly close, only having sat next to each other a few days when Ino beat her to the seat by Sasuke. Nevertheless, Sakura had enjoyed the intelligent conversations they had had.

But none of that explained why he was here.

“Shikamaru?” she asked again.

The pineapple haired boy still on the ground beneath her exhaled. “I was out running errands for my mother. I noticed you just standing there staring at that building so I thought I would ask if you were okay, but if you’re going to throw me on the ground I guess I shouldn’t have bothered.”

Sakura noticed the bag on the ground which contained Shikamaru’s spilled groceries. She found it hard to believe that the lazy Nara was grocery shopping for his mother. The boy hardly ever did anything for himself; she couldn’t imagine him willingly doing something for his mother.

Just thinking about his mother brought tears to her eyes. Her own mother constantly asked her to help out in the bakery or run to the market to get more flour. The pinkette started crying again, completely freaking out Shikamaru.

“Jeez girl, there’s no need to cry. I didn’t mean to upset you.” Although Shikamaru had no idea what he said that made her bawl. He looked at her. Her face was turning red; clearly this wasn’t the first time she cried today. Her cheeks were blotchy and he could see tear tracks from before. Her green eyes were bloodshot and puffy.

He groaned at the thought of having to comfort a crying girl. Shikamaru was never good with girls to begin with, he found them entirely too troublesome to bother with, but her couldn’t leave her alone like this.

“Hey Sakura, what are you doing out so late? Won’t your parents be worried?”

That had apparently been the wrong thing to say. Shikamaru found himself unable to move when she start wailing and buried her head into his jacket. If he hadn’t been so worried about what had set her off to make her cry so drastically, he would have said something about how she was getting his jacket wet and crying girls were troublesome.

He gently eased himself into a sitting position and wrapped both arms around her. “Why don’t you tell me what’s wrong? Maybe I can help.”

Sakura didn’t say anything at first. She continued to soak his jacket with tears. Just when he
thought he was going to have to use his shadow possession to force her to walk home, even though he didn’t know where the girl lived, she spoke.

It was soft. And muffled by her head on his chest. But he heard it nonetheless. “This is my home.”

Shikamaru didn’t understand what Sakura had said. If this was her home, why was she standing outside crying? The house in front of him looked pleasant, and there was a light on upstairs so someone had to be inside.

“They’re doing what you’re doing out here? You should go inside.”

Sakura took her head out of his jacket and stared at him with a look that told him she thought he was nuts. But she didn’t say anything. Instead she raised a hand and pointed behind him.

Clearly Shikamaru’s assumption was wrong. The girl doesn’t live in the house in front of him. He turned his head, careful to make sure he didn’t jostle the pinkette, to look at the house behind.

For the first time in his life Shikamaru felt like a total idiot. He had seen that the invasion had caused some damage on this street, and Sakura had been standing in front of one of the few damaged buildings on the street. For Kami’s sake he had seen her staring at the ruined house when he approached her. He should have easily pieced together that she lived in the house that had been destroyed. There was no reason logically for her to be crying otherwise.

However, something didn’t make sense. The damage to her house couldn’t be the problem, or not all of it anyway. Sakura hadn’t said anything about her home until he asked her what was bothering her. But she had already been crying before he had asked. Although she hadn’t been when he first approached her. What had happened to cause her to cry?

Shikamaru nearly slapped himself in the head, and he probably would have if he hadn’t been holding Sakura. She had started crying when he had asked about her parents. So something was clearly wrong with them.

“Sakura, where are your parents? Are they alright?”

Sakura’s crying started anew. The only thing he managed to understand between her violent sobs was something about a letter. Shikamaru looked at the road, trying to find the letter amongst the remnants of his mother’s groceries.

It wasn’t hard to find. A quick look told him it was a formal notice of some sort.

*Sakura Haruno,*

*We are sorry to inform you that your parents were among the casualties of the Sound and Sand invasion that occurred on Monday earlier this week. At your earliest convenience, we require your presence at Konohagakure’s Morgue to confirm the bodies.*

*With sincere condolences,*

*Isshin Yukiono.*

It was short, blunt, and emotionless. Shikamaru felt anger bubble in his gut on Sakura’s behalf. For the poor girl to find out that both her parents were dead from a letter, and a letter that asked her to identify their bodies, was cruel and it was no wonder she was crying uncontrollably. He briefly wondered why none of her team was with her considering one of them usually walked her home, but pushed it to the back of his mind to think about later. Right now he had to figure out how to help her.
Shikamaru wasn’t sure what he could do. He couldn’t bring her to the Hokage so she could settle something with him because the Third Hokage was dead as well and a replacement hadn’t been named. He couldn’t involve her teammates at this point, if they didn’t already know they would be of no help now, and if they knew and didn’t care, well, that would be worse and he didn’t want to think that was the case. And, cruel as it seemed, the orphanages were most likely overburdened already and wouldn’t be able to deal with another child to care for, and some would refuse because she was a ninja.

He sighed, shifting her gently so he could carry her on his back and taking extreme care not to wake her up. He’d have to bring her back to the Nara compound for the night until a solution could be found. Maybe his parents would be able to help.

‘Huh, wouldn’t mom be happy. I’m finally bringing home a girl,’ Shikamaru thought sarcastically.

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‘What a drag.’

Shikamaru knew he couldn’t bring home a girl to his mother, much less a random girl he’s never spoken to her of, without some sort of reaction. But fainting was not one of the possibilities he had even thought his annoying bossy mother was capable of. It baffled him because he honestly expected for her to start yelling at the top of her lungs like she usually did whenever he and his lackadaisical attitude was concerned.

What was even more troublesome was the reaction his mother’s fainting caused. The thump when she hit the wooden floor brought his father slinking into the entry room. Shikaku’s eyes quickly took in the scene, from his unconscious mother to the pink haired girl on his back to the late hour and to the lack of groceries which he had been sent out for.

“Who’s the girl?” It was the only question his father needed to ask because she and his reason for bringing her to his home were the only unknowns in his equation.

“Sakura Haruno.” Shikaku nodded. Shikamaru had told his father about the girl with candy colored locks that sometimes sat beside him in class. He had mentioned her abnormal intelligence for her age and that she might be good at shogi.

Shikaku gave him a look that Shikamaru knew well. It said not to worry for now; everything will be dealt with in the morning. Nothing else needed to be said between father and son. Shikamaru hefted Sakura up a little on his back and turned down the hallway that went to his room, leaving his father to deal with his mother.

The young Nara gently placed his cargo on his bed. He tucked Sakura in and exited. Though his back would hurt in the morning from a night spent on the couch, he didn’t mind. It would only be for one night and the poor girl deserved a good night’s rest.

So, armed with a spare pillow and blanket, Shikamaru settled into the couch. However, sleep eluded him. The current situation was so complicated that he felt troublesome was not good enough to describe it. This was the first time the genius couldn’t find an answer.

Sakura’s parents were dead, her home destroyed, and her team either didn’t know or didn’t care. He had taken her to his home but still didn’t know how he could help. He was uncertain of how to interact with her. Would she even want anyone around right now? There was no way he could pretend things were normal between them. He had gone from not knowing each other to him being her confidant, if sharing her troubles with him counted as confiding in him.
Shikamaru eventually decided thinking wasn’t going to change anything. He had comforted her in a time of need and brought her to his house where she would be taken care of. He would talk to Sakura when she woke and they would work things out with the help of his parents.

He couldn’t resist a whispered “troublesome” before he finally relaxed and allowed himself to fall asleep.

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Sakura much preferred the room she woke up in after the second time she blacked out that week. It was rather simple and plain, but that was way better than the nausea inducing white walls of the hospital room. Although, this wasn’t any room she recognized, and she couldn’t help but wonder why she wasn’t in her own room.

Her own room.

Whatever euphoria Sakura felt at not waking up in a hospital room plummeted as her heart dropped to her stomach.

She wasn’t sleeping in her bed in her room because her room was gone. She remembered the complete numbness she had felt when she saw her home reduced to rubble and crying on Shikamaru.

‘Shikamaru!’ He had brought her here, wherever here was, but where was he?

Sakura nearly had a heart attack when the boy in question opened the door to the room she had been given. He had cautiously poked his head around the door to check on her, and upon seeing she was awake opened the door all the way.

He sat down on the bed beside her but didn’t say anything. Sakura was quite glad he didn’t ask questions she wasn’t ready to talk about or push for answers she felt uneasy giving.

“Do you want some breakfast, Sakura?”

The question was one she hadn’t been expecting, but once she registered what he asked, Sakura felt a sense of relief. On some level, Shikamaru understood that she wasn’t ready to talk about her breakdown yesterday and she couldn’t be happier that he was treating her as normally as he could in such circumstances.

Sakura expressed feeling embarrassed to attend breakfast with his parents in clothes she had worn the day before and smelling like she hadn’t showered, but Shikamaru had shrugged, putting his hands in his pockets, and said his parents were as laid back as he was and would understand her plight and wouldn’t mind her appearance. So she followed the Nara heir to the kitchen where his father was already seated at the table by the window and a woman she assumed to be his mother was at the stove.

The brunette turned to greet them when they entered, giving the children a bright smile. “It’s so good to see you up, Sakura-chan. You’ve been asleep for two days. I thought Shikamaru was going to start complaining about you hogging his bed soon.”

‘Two days! I slept for two days. Wait, did she just say Shikamaru’s bed?’ Sakura’s face burned. She had thought it was a guest room, which would explain the simplisticness of it and the sparse furniture.

“I’m sorry to have imposed on you like this. You didn’t have to put me in Shikamaru’s room.”
“Oh it’s fine dear. Shikamaru was to one to put you there and he adamantly refused to move you.” Shikamaru’s mother waved her apology off with a wave off her hand. Sakura looked at him to see a light dusting of pink crawl across his cheeks.

She took a seat at the table with a quiet thank you, both for the food and to Shikamaru. She never would have thought the laziest boy in her class capable of caring for someone he didn’t know. It made her stomach flutter to realize that she wasn’t as alone as she had previously believed herself to be. She still had her teammates, although she didn’t know where they were. She wondered if they were worried about her since she hadn’t shown up for training yesterday or today. And now she had Shikamaru, and judging by the soft looks on his mother’s face, his family too.

The pinkette reveled in the peacefulness of breakfast. It came to a rather abrupt end when Shikamaru’s father asked what had happened to her two days ago.

Tears immediately came to life in her green eyes and her throat constricted causing her to nearly choke on the sausage she had just eaten. She didn’t think she was ready to talk about the loss of her parents and her home. She looked at Shikamaru who was sitting next to her, and shot him a pleading glance, giving him permission to tell his parents what he knew.

He surprised her by putting one hand on her thigh and squeezing lightly before turning to address his father’s question. Sakura didn’t hear a word he said as she gently squeezed his hand back. She was so relieved she had someone she could trust on lean on for support, even though Shikamaru was not the first person she had imagined lined up for the position. Perhaps it was the fact that he expressed genuine disinterest and a lack of care for everything that made her believe he could help her. Because he was doing neither now so he had to care for her a little bit.

Shikamaru’s mother gathered her into a hug, putting a halt to Sakura’s thoughts. Despite Sakura’s protests that she didn’t want to be a burden and that it would be easy to find an apartment, Yoshino insisted that she stay with them. Unwilling to argue when Shikamaru’s mother was being so generous, she agreed. On the condition that they set her up in a guest room or on the couch so she wouldn’t be imposing on Shikamaru by staying in his room the whole time she was there.

Sakura spent the rest of the morning staring blankly at the ceiling of her new temporary room trying not to remember what her house had looked like or imagine her parents’ mangled bodies. She knew it wasn’t healthy to wallow in despair, but she honestly could not work up the effort needed to move. She was probably going to spend the rest of the day in here too and not go and see if Gai-sensei was training his team this afternoon, because leaving the Nara compound meant having to answer questions on her whereabouts and she didn’t want to tell anyone what had happened yet.

But she knew that it was inevitable. Her teammates and sensei would only ignore her absence for so long before they tore apart the village looking for her. Or at least Naruto would anyway. She wouldn’t be surprised if Kakashi-sensei already knew where she was and exactly what had happened and she bet Sasuke probably thought she was annoying.

Ever since the mission to Wave country Sasuke had been even moodier than usual. He was snippy towards her, demanding of their sensei, and picking fights with Naruto at every opportunity. Even though she had proved to have some skills and that she was capable of creating strategies, he scoffed at her and ignored her. Sakura was starting to find the complete rudeness he treated her with despicable. She had done nothing to earn this treatment of his but he continued to act as if she had done him a grave wrong.

Sakura stayed in her room, moping as Shikamaru called her behavior, for another four days before the pineapple haired boy forcibly dragged her out and demanded she do something other than impersonate a zombie.
Although she wanted to glare at him and rage and cry that her parents had just died so she should be allowed time to mourn, she knew he was right. She could mourn without hiding in the Nara’s guest room all day. And she knew that her team had to be frantic by this point. It had been almost a week since she had last seen them.

So Sakura took a shower and dressed in clothes that Yoshino had provided for her. She made a mental reminder to do some shopping after her first mission. She didn’t have much in the way of personal items at the moment. She hadn’t had the nerve to return to her destroyed house and look amongst the rubble for anything salvageable.

The rosette decided it was finally time to face the inquisition that was her team and headed for Team 7’s bridge. It was approaching ten so Naruto and Sasuke would still be waiting for their chronically late sensei. Shikamaru accompanied her part way, leaving to meet with his own team with a promise to pick her up at the bridge in a couple of hours.

A couple more minutes of walking brought her to Team 7’s bridge, and just as she had anticipated, Naruto and Sasuke were already there waiting impatiently for Kakashi-sensei. She took a deep breath to calm herself and approached the two boys.

Naruto spotted her first, making her believe the blonde had some sort of Sakura detector because he had yelled her name the second she had appeared in his line of vision, which was a feat in and of itself because his back had been facing her. He gave her his largest bear hug to date, which she swore cracked a few ribs, and started asking questions so quickly that she couldn’t understand a word he said.

She was saved by the appearance of Kakashi, who gave her that smile that he reserved for her, “Glad you’re feeling better, Sakura?”

The girl nearly kissed Kakashi-sensei for the excuse he provided her and told Naruto that she had been sick for the last couple of days and that was her reason for missing practice.

Kakashi-sensei didn’t have any plans for the day beyond sparring since he didn’t know when Sakura would return. He told Naruto and Sasuke to practice their taijutsu and pulled Sakura aside, which neither boy noticed because they were too busy fighting.

Concern shown in his visible eye. “Are you alright, Sakura?”

Sakura sighed heavily. It was a loaded question. Was she alright? Overall, no, definitely not. But she was getting there. She was in a hard place at the moment, but she wasn’t alone. She had Shikamaru and his family to support her and they had provided her with a place to live.

“No, but I will be.” It was the best answer she could give him. Her parents’ death still felt like someone had stabbed her heart, but with time she would come to be able to bear the pain.

His dark eye scrutinized her, trying to discern if she was telling the truth. Satisfied that she was, Kakashi ruffled her pink hair. “Just remember. I always help you if you need it.”

Not wanting to cry, because she knew if she started she wouldn’t stop until her tears ran dry, Sakura hugged her sensei, trying to convey through that embrace that she trusted him to be there for her. He seemed to get the message, for he hugged her back, and student and sensei sat in easy silence and watched the other two members of Team 7 scuffle in the dirt.

Kakashi-sensei, as was typical of him, vanished at the end of practice with the message of no practice tomorrow and was gone before any of his students could draw the breath to ask why practice was cancelled. Sakura denied Naruto’s offer to go eat ramen with him and hunched over
the railing of the bridge to await Shikamaru.

“My mother wants you two to come to dinner tonight.”

It took Sakura a few minutes of staring incredulously at Sasuke to understand that it was him that had spoken. The Uchiha maintained a habit of not speaking unless necessary and certainly did his best to avoid talking to her. Then again, given that he was now the only member on the team with a mother, Sakura should have known that he was the one who had spoken.

Before she had a chance to say she wasn’t in the mood to attend, Naruto had attempted to tackle Sasuke yelling that they would both be there. Sakura wanted to put her fist through the blonde’s stomach for speaking for her, but she realized it was futile. Even if she had said she didn’t want to go the two of them would find a way to drag her to Sasuke’s house anyway, so it was better to just agree now than suffer later.

She gazed apathetically at her reflection in the stream as her two teammates walked away. She knew today was going to be horrible. Why had she let Shikamaru convince her she needed to get out of the house?

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Sakura fidgeted uncomfortably under the stares of Sasuke’s father and older brother.

They had been seated at a really fancy table. Fugaku sat at the head and his wife was at the other end. Sakura had elected to sit on the Uchiha Matriarch’s right, and Sasuke was beside her. Directly across from her was Naruto. Itachi, as clan heir, was sitting at his father’s right hand.

Sakura had picked to sit next to Mikoto one, because she was the only other female at the table, but two, and most importantly, because both Sasuke’s father and older brother intimidating her just by standing in the same room as her. She was sure if she sat next to either of them she would end up acting like a scared little girl unable to speak.

But that seemed to be the case anyway because both Fugaku and Itachi were staring at her with dark onyx eyes and impassive faces that were making her twitchy.

“So, Sakura-chan,” Sasuke’s mother started, “I understand that you’re from a civilian family. Why did you decide to become a ninja instead of being a part of your parents’ business?”

Sakura ignored the pain she felt when Mikoto mentioned her parents and tried to think of an answer to give her. There was no way she could tell them she became a ninja solely to get close to Sasuke because he had protected her from some bullies. That would totally embarrass her. But, Ino had done the same thing.

“I was picked on often when I was younger because of my pink hair and large forehead. I made my first friend when Ino defended me. So when she decided to become a kunoichi I signed up too.”

“Are your parents okay with you being a shinobi?”

Sakura knew that Mikoto meant well and was just trying to get to know her son’s teammates, but she couldn’t stop her cringe at that question. “I . . . they were okay with my decision.”

She took a sip from her water already knowing that someone at the table would notice that ‘were’ and call her out on it.

And she was right. “Were?” Itachi asked.
Sakura licked her lips trying to moisten them. “They . . . my parents died during the attack on the chuunin exams.”

A strained silence fell over the table. Both her teammates were staring at her with a mixture of shock, pity, worry, confusion, and questioning looks. They wondered why Sakura had not mentioned earlier that her parents had died and were worried about where she was staying now. A wounded look crossed Naruto’s face briefly when he realized that Sakura had not confided in her own team, but he pushed that hurt aside assuming that she just wasn’t ready to talk about it and that she had spent the last week grieving and that’s why she wasn’t at any of their team’s practices.

Mikoto, looking reluctant, asked, “Are you living on your own now? If you need help you could come and stay with us. You did save Sasuke’s life. It would be the least we could do.”

Sakura had thought Mikoto had said that just to be nice. A quick glance at Fugaku, whose face had softened minutely, told her that the Uchihas would welcome them into her home. Well, everyone but Sasuke would. Despite his feeling worried for her just moments ago, the youngest Uchiha son was clearly put out at the idea of her moving into his home.

Sakura gently denied the Uchiha’s offer. “Thank you, but the Naras have already generously given me a room in their home. Besides, I couldn’t accept. I didn’t really save Sasuke’s life. I’m only just beginning to learn medical ninjutsu, so I doubt that I managed to actually heal him.”

Sasuke’s mother was unwilling to drop the topic. “But you did Sakura-chan. Fugaku, Itachi, and I saw it ourselves. And the two medics that were going to heal him confirmed it. They said you had done a wonderfully job, especially since you’ve only been learning for a month. You really impressed them. Us too. If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to ask the Uchiha clan. You saved our son’s life so we owe you a debt.”

The young female shifted uneasily in her seat as her face flushed a brilliant red color that resembled a tomato. She was unused to receiving praise and it made her uncomfortable for Mikoto’s every word about her to be dripping with it. It didn’t help matters that Sasuke was now sporting a glower. Clearly he didn’t like to be reminded that his female teammate has saved his life. He probably thought she would ask him a favor in return and Sasuke hated to owe anyone. The fact that it was her would only invoke further resentment.

Left with no other choice, Sakura smiled politely, hoping they wouldn’t see it for the fake smile it was, and promised to take the Uchihas up on their offer if she ever needed to. She was sure the only one at the table that believed her little performance was Naruto, but the blonde was so dense that he would only see her smiling and automatically believe her to be happy.

Thankfully, the dinner discussion left anything having to deal with the invasion. Mikoto started asking about their training. Sakura was able to answer these queries much more easily and felt infinitely better now that Mikoto’s attention wasn’t focused solely on her. Naruto had started rambling, ranting and raving as soon as the Uchiha Matriarch asked him about his training since he became a gennin.

The ninja that loved orange explained their team’s sessions with little true detail, a lot of exaggeration, crude complaints about Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke-teme every other sentence, and spent most of it trying to provoke Sasuke’s temper and start a shouting match. When it was Sakura’s turn she mentioned she was a genjutsu type, a fact that seemed to catch the rest of Sasuke’s family’s interest (which she didn’t understand because there was no way her genjutsu could match those of the Uchihas Sharigan), used earth and water release jutsus, and that she had recently decided to study medical ninjutsu a become a medical ninja that surpassed the Legendary
Sannin Tsunade.

After that the tension floating over the table melted and conversation flowed smoothly between Naruto, Sakura, Mikoto, and Sasuke, who was unnaturally talkative that evening. Only after she had been escorted out of the compound by Sasuke’s silent brother and to Shikamaru who was waiting to bring her back to the Nara compound, did she realize that Itachi had only said one word the entire time and his father not at all. Mikoto had skillfully maneuvered her and Naruto into sustaining the conversation with a little input from her every now and again, making her totally forget the other two Uchihas sitting at the table observing her and critiquing her every movement and answer.

She sank onto her bed hoping that they accomplished whatever their real objective was, because there wasn’t a snowball’s chance in Suna that meeting Sasuke’s teammates was all they wanted. Whatever reason she and Naruto had been invited to dinner at the Uchiha house had to do with her because ninety percent of the conversation was directed towards her.

-CHUUNIN-

“That poor girl,” Mikoto murmured to her husband after their sons had walked their guests to the gate. “To lose your parents at such a young age. She must be devastated.”

“Hn.” Mikoto knew Fugaku well enough after nineteen years of marriage to know that he wasn’t disparaging the pink haired girl. It was more of a comment on how well she maintained her composure. To be honest, she wasn’t the only one that expected the girl to burst into an uncontrollable flood of tears.

“From what she said, Sakura has rather remarkable chakra control. Walking up trees and on water on her first tries. Even Itachi wasn’t that good when he was learning. And if she’s learning medical ninjutsu, it must be even better then she let on.” Before she had quit her career as a kunoichi to marry, Mikoto had started learning the basics of medical ninjutsu herself. It wasn’t any easier to learn with more age and experience. She couldn’t accomplish what Sakura had in a month after a whole year of training.

“Yes,” Fugaku agreed, “she certainly has talent.”

Neither husband nor wife spoke anymore, but both understood that it would serve them well to watch the pink haired girl and keep an ear open to follow her progress. Sakura would be a great benefit to the Uchiha clan if she could become greater than Tsunade and discover a solution to the eventual blindness their clan’s kekkei genkai caused.

-CHUUNIN-

Shikamaru was frustrated. It wasn’t a state of being he found himself in often seeing as he did everything under the sun possible to avoid anything that was the least bit troublesome and or frustrating. But, every time he found himself truly frustrated with the situation at hand, it only served to annoy him, something else he was not often and disliked being. It had been one full month since Sakura stepped foot outside the Nara compound and one month since the awkward, a.k.a. disastrous dinner at the Uchiha’s house. She returned to locking herself in her room when she wasn’t out tending to the Nara Clan’s herd of deer, which she somehow, he had yet to figure out exactly how but knew it involved tears, puppy dog eyes and a promise to distract his mother, convinced his father to let her help with. Shikaku had gone one step further and began instructing her in some of the medicine the Nara Clan made with the antlers when she announced her plan to study the field of a medical ninja.

The brunette knew he wasn’t close to Sakura. Hell, he barely even knew her despite them being in
the same class at the Academy. The most time he had ever spent with the girl was when she came
to live under their roof for the past five weeks. But he liked to think he knew her better now and
hoped that she would regain some of her former personality so he could continue to get to know
her. Without his noticing, or his consent for that matter, he had somehow come to start thinking of
Sakura as a sort of sister figure. And while he had practically grown up with Ino and Chouji, he
would never call Ino his sister because the blonde was altogether too loud, to Sasuke obsessed and
too troublesome. But, at the same time, he found that he would not mind having that sibling
relationship with Sakura.

At first Sakura may have been just as Sasuke obsessed as his teammate, but Shikamaru believed
that more to be Ino’s influence and Sakura’s desire to fit in with the other girls training to be
kunoichi rather than true feelings on the pinkette’s end. Sakura was also much quieter than Ino,
even before she became mute when her parents’ died. She also wasn’t one to be controlling,
bossy, and demanding, although she would if she ever spent any time one on one with his mother.
Sakura was a contradiction. With bright pink hair the color of the cherry blossoms she was named
for and shining green eyes, but having a personality that was shy but outspoken, reserved but
bold, nondescript but unable to go unnoticed, tame yet ferocious, calm but easy to anger,
intelligent but not a genius, a talented first generation kunoichi. Every inch of her gave off the
appearance of being soft, gentle, and weak, which she was anything but. Sakura was truly a kind
and caring individual, but she wasn’t perfect. She had her moments when her rage exploded and it
didn’t matter who it was directed at.

But all the different pieces that made Sakura only made Shikamaru more intrigued. He wanted to
piece her together and see her for who she truly was. He wanted to see the day when she outgrew
her insecurities and blossomed into the wonderful and amazing kunoichi that she would no doubt
be. And every detail he discovered, every fact he learned, only brought forth the urge to protect
her, to care for her, to watch out for her and offer support. Shikamaru could only hope that Sakura
would get past this ordeal so the bond between them could grow and be strengthened, possibly
allowing them to be as close as two people who really were brother and sister.

Knowing that it was rude and that his mother would lecture it for him if she ever found out,
Shikamaru slipped into Sakura’s room without knocking and gaining said girl’s permission. The
only reaction he received was an uninterested stare from the strawberry haired girl occupying the
bed.

The Nara heir gave her a glare, which he almost never bothered with because anything worth
getting bothered about to glare at was too troublesome. “Look, Sakura. I know that I can’t
understand how you’re feeling right now. But moping and antisocial tendencies aren’t healthy.
You have a duty as a ninja, yet you haven’t gone to a team practice in a month, nor have you
stepped foot in the hospital to continue your medical ninjutsu lessons. Do you honestly think that
this is what your parents wanted for you? For you to be stripped of your rights as a ninja because
you are disregarding your duties.”

The sigh Sakura released told him that she had listened to his impassioned speech and the quiet
sobs informed Shikamaru that her hiding herself from the world was over. He left behind the topic
about her parents and the duty she owed her village as a ninja, knowing she understood him, and
set up the shogi board he had brought with him and explained the rules. His face softened as she
laughed for the first time, leaving Shikamaru with no doubts that they would become like family.

-Chuunin-

The world had tipped on its ear since the last time Sakura had stepped off Nara property a month
ago.

Team 7 was currently off active duty due to Naruto being on a one month mission with Jiraiya the
Toad Mountain Sage, the last member of the Legendary Sannin. He wouldn’t be back for another week, so in the meantime Team 7 had no missions.

She had nearly lost her position at the hospital. The nurses had informed the Head Medic of her approach before she even set foot inside the hospital front doors, and the man had promptly dragged her by the arm to his office. Once inside he ranted and paced and threw his hands in the air as her lectured on how she had disappointed him and that her student status was going to be revoked as she would not be able to reapply for another year and that he had expected more from her after all the dedication she had shown him the first day.

Sakura could only stare at her fourth sensei wide eyed with her jaw dropping further with each word he uttered before she managed to shake herself out of her stupor and tell him, as much as it pained her to talk about and she still hated mentioning it, that her parents had died in the recent attack.

The Head Medic paused mid word, mouth gaping similar to the fish out of water she had to heal. Then his mouth snapped shut, his whole face turned a bright red, and he gave the young girl his sincere apologies for making unfounded assumptions on her character and jumping to conclusions before assuring her that it would be a pleasure to continue to teach her until Tsunade-sama arrived.

“Tsunade-sama?” Sakura knew who the woman was, but the granddaughter of the First Hokage had left the village after the Third Great Shinobi War and hadn’t stepp foot on the Land of Fire’s territory since.

“Oh yes,” he gushed, “Jiraiya-sama has convinced Tsunade-sama to return to the village and become the Godaime Hokage. And I’m sure that she’ll have time to take you as an apprentice even though she’ll be busy rebuilding and running the village. It would be such a shame to waste your talents. Tsunade-sama will be able to teach you much more than I ever could. Under her tutelage you will become a medical prodigy.”

Sakura had tuned out the rest of his praising rambling. He had said that Jiraiya had convinced her to return, and Naruto had recently gone on a long mission with the Sannin, so Naruto had already met the woman that was Sakura’s idol. She wondered if Tsunade would really have the time to teach an apprentice. Despite the Head Medic’s numerous compliments, she didn’t believe herself to be as talented as he was proclaiming. A legendary medic like Tsunade wouldn’t waste any time with little girls like her.

She felt like she had been hit with one of Gai-sensei’s punches when she finally escaped the Head Medic’s office and the hospital. So much had happened in the last month that she wanted to find a place that was unchanged by the constant chaos.

The solution dawned on her. Gai-sensei was always the same. She could go to this afternoon’s practice and pretend for a few hours that the world was normal and that nothing around them was changing faster than she was ready for. She was actually surprised the idea of going to Gai’s team didn’t occur to her earlier and she felt ashamed that she hadn’t been to see any of them in over a month.

Decision made, Sakura made tracks to Team Gai’s training ground. She smiled largely when she saw them all there even though it hurt her face to do so. It had been so long since she smiled for real.

Neji had been the first one to spot her, although his reaction wasn’t what she expected. Sakura had been anticipating some concern for her long absence and relief upon finally seeing her, but the brunette was doing his best impression of a stone wall, complete with a creepy, fierce glare.
The pinkette tool a step back, preparing to turn around and flee because Neji clearly didn’t want her here, but then Gai-sensei saw her. He ignored her weak protests and dragged her over to spar with Lee.

The spar was over quickly, not that she had expected otherwise. Out of practice for a month and never having been up to Lee’s standards, it was no surprise that Sakura didn’t last very long against the rising taijutsu master. Gai-sensei praised her anyway and set her to learning the basics of the next taijutsu style he was teaching her.

Aside from Lee and Gai-sensei’s yells of youth, no one spoke for the remainder of the training session. Sakura knew that Neji was upset with her, although she didn’t know the reason why, and so she made no attempt to even strike up a simple conversation with him or with Tenten for the girl had decided to partner up with Neji, as usual.

Gai called an end to training early, claiming he had an important meeting to attend. All four gennin knew it to be code for “It’s time for another challenge between myself and Kakashi! YOSH!” Sakura was more dejected than she had been all day. Team Gai had been one of the few constants in her life, and the only one she expected to remain unchanged by the death of her parents, but it was not so. Without meaning to she had somehow managed to anger the Hyuuga prodigy, and since Tenten stuck to his side like glue, she lost the female companionship they had. Only Gai-sensei and Lee were the same.

But Sakura wasn’t happy with that. She enjoyed the camaraderie she had with Team Gai. While Team 7 was great and she was growing under Kakashi-sensei’s guidance, her team was dysfunctional at best and always getting in trouble. With Team Gai, training was serious yet more relaxed at the same time. it was for the purpose of improving your skills, not about trying to show up your rival in every way possible. It was like being part of a normal team.

She couldn’t leave practice with the bonds between them as frayed as they were.

Calling up every last bit of courage she had, Sakura approached Neji taking note of the dislike and disapproval in his eyes. Before he could say anything, most likely something along the lines of “get lost, you’re not welcome here,” the rosette bowed at the waist.

“I apologize for whatever I did to make you so upset and angry at me.” She straightened and sprinted away from Team Gai’s training ground before Neji had the chance to say anything scornful or mocking towards her.

“Wait, Sakura-chan!” Lee yelled. Sakura halted her fast get away and turn to face him.

“Will you come back for training in the morning?”

Sakura briefly looked at all three members of Team Gai. Lee was the only one that appeared happy at the thought of her rejoining them each training session. Tenten was looking nervously between Neji and Lee, apparently unable to decide whether she wanted her female friend back or wanted to support Neji more. And although Neji didn’t seem to be mad at her anymore, he still didn’t look like he cared to have her train with them again.

She bit her lip nervously and shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she debated mentally. Overall, she Sakura decided it was best that she not return. It would cause less tension between Team Gai. And it wasn’t like she needed Gai-sensei to learn taijutsu. She didn’t want to be a taijutsu mistress, just build a steady foundation so she could actually fight hand to hand combat if the need arose. She could easily learn different styles from taijutsu scrolls and Kakashi-sensei would help her.
“I don’t think so Lee. I should train with my team. I’m sorry.”

“Will you at least tell us where you’ve been the last month? I think you owe us that, Sakura. We are your friends.”

Sakura stared at Tenten as she spoke to her for the first time all day. The brunette’s words crashed into her. Of course she owed them an explanation. She had trained with them for months and then disappeared until today. She was surprised they still considered her a friend. She would have hated it if someone she called friend dropped off the radar for over a month.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized again, this time to all three. “My parents died during the invasion and I had to find a new place to live.”

Sakura watched as all three gennin’s jaws dropped and took on faces in varying degrees of shock and sympathy. Lee opened and closed his mouth twice unable to find something appropriate to say besides general condolences, which he was sure the pink haired girl didn’t want. Tenten shifted awkwardly, a look of regret on her face. Neji’s reaction surprised her most. His face had softened and he looked at her with concern shining in his white eyes.

The three gennin continued to stare at her making her wish she had never let Shikamaru convince her to leave the compound.

“Let me walk you home.”

Sakura tried to say that it wasn’t necessary since she was staying with the Naras and Shikamaru always came to take her home, but Neji refused to take no for an answer, so she and Neji said goodbye to his two teammates and he fell into step at her side.

She didn’t say anything, didn’t even glance at the boy walking next to her. She knew he wanted to discuss something of importance with her, otherwise he would have said his piece in front of Tenten and Lee, and that he would speak when he was ready.

“I wanted to apologize.” Sakura blinked confusedly at him. “My behavior during practice was unwarranted.”

“It’s not a problem, Neji. If I did something to make you angry then you have every right to act that way.” She assured him.

“But I don’t. The reason for my anger was because your teammates interrupted my fight with that Sand ninja and your absence from training for over a month. I shouldn’t have taken by anger at Naruto and Sasuke out on you. And I should have known you wouldn’t intentionally skip practice unless something was wrong. You’ve never missed one despite the early and long hours or when you were sick.”

Sakura just knew she was blushing. It wasn’t every day that Neji Hyuuga apologized, and he had commended her commitment to her training. “It’s fine, Neji. I was angry at Naruto and Sasuke too. Still am for that matter. And I really should have at least told Gai-sensei I wouldn’t be coming to practice for a while.”

She smiled sheepishly at him and he gave her a small smile in return. And just like that everything was forgotten and the two managed to talk about the minor changes that had occurred in the last month. Sakura told Neji about the disastrous dinner with the Uchiha family, which the normally reserved boy laughed at, and how Shikamaru was teaching her to play shogi and how much she was starting to love the game. Although she had yet to beat the young genius, she had a lot of fun creating strategies that forced the Nara to actually think. Neji informed her about the sibling
relationship he and Hinata were trying to rebuild. He had taken Naruto’s comment about making your own fate to heart, although she wondered when the blonde had said that because she didn’t remember it. And she wished she knew it. If it was powerful enough to make Neji reconsider his views on the Hyuuga’s main and side branches, none of which were happy, then she wanted to know what Naruto had said. She had never taken him to be a motivational speaker.

Neji left her at the Nara Compound’s gate with the promise (order really) that she attend practice in the morning. It was only after he disappeared from sight that Sakura realized she had been staring after him. She had had a really enjoyable conversation with Neji, the most silent member of Team Gai that had lasted the whole walk home. She found that she really liked talking about everyday things with Neji and that he wasn’t as cold as he appeared to be.

Sakura entered the compound and found Shikamaru sitting on the front porch of his house, well their house she guessed, with a shogi board in front of him and wearing a knowing smirk.

And she had to admit as she took a seat across from him that he was right, like always. Leaving the house wasn’t too bad. In fact, it had turned out to be a pretty good day.

-CHUUNIN-

Sakura did not attend training with Gai’s team as Neji had demanded the day before. But it was okay because Neji didn’t either. Both of them had been called to the Hokage’s office first thing in the morning. A.K.A. even earlier than Gai-sensei had them up and running laps.

It turned out that Naruto and Jiraiya had returned to the village yesterday afternoon with Tsunade and her assistant. Tsunade had been named the fifth Hokage, the reason that Naruto was sulking before he declared that he would take that hat from her in a few years, and her first order of business was dealing with the chunnin selection exams promotion.

She tried not to appear nervous as the newly name Godaime Hokage sat at her desk with steepled fingers and stared long and hard at all six gennin assembled. Sakura took the time to observe the woman that was revered as the Legendary Slug Sannin and the greatest medic in all five major countries. Despite knowing that the Sannin were older than Kakashi-sensei, Lady Tsunade looked to be in her twenties, with waist length blonde hair in two pigtails, light amber eyes, a diamond seal on her forehead, and a really large chest. She was wearing a green robe and a grey kimono styled blouse that showed off her immense cleavage. She wasn’t wearing the Hokage’s hat.

Behind her right shoulder stood a woman with dark chin length hair of average height and slender build. Her black eyes were slightly covered by her black bangs, and she wore a black kimono. Honestly, the woman reminded Sakura of Sasuke with the way she dressed. The most interesting thing about her was the pig in her arms. The pig was wearing a pearl necklace and a red jacket, and Sakura wondered why on earth the pig was wearing anything.

Tsunade leaned back in her chair, folding her arms under her already amply chest. “I have reviewed each of your performances from the chunnin selection exam. I believe that there are three who are capable of taking on the duties of a chunnin.”

That was when Sakura noticed the three flak chunnin vests that were on her desk almost hidden by the unbelievable amount of paperwork.

Tsunade picked up the three vests and stepped around her desk. “I’ll start with Shino. Unfortunately while you showed skill in your clan’s ability, you demonstrated no abilities beyond that and did not plan your fight very well.”

Shino nodded in acceptance of the Hokage’s criticism.
“Shikamaru Nara. You won your match and showed immense promise as a strategist and the ability to outmaneuver an opponent and flexibility in your plans. For those reasons you have been promoted to chuunin.”

The pineapple haired slouched forward to accept his vest mumbling under his breath about how troublesome an advance in rank was because it meant more work. Sakura would have slapped him upside the head if she was standing next to him, but since she wasn’t she promised to deliver when they went home.

“Naruto Uzumaki and Sasuke Uchiha. You are both strong fighters and skilled shinobi, but you lack the ability to think before you leap. You both demonstrated great skill, but because you leapt into battle against a dangerous opponent without authorization from your sensei or some other official, you two will not be promoted to chuunin.”

Sasuke scowled furiously on her left, clearly having expected to be made a chuunin. Naruto wasn’t as quiet in his protest.

“But Baa-chan! We defeated Gaara. Doesn’t that count for something?”

‘Baa-chan?’ Sakura couldn’t believe Naruto had just called their Hokage an old granny. Tsunade was just as annoyed at the name if the bursting vein on her forehead was anything to go by.

“Yes, you defeated Gaara. But as gennins, your duty in case of an attack on the village is to get civilians to safety. Not charge in blindly and fight an enemy that you know nothing about and that was clearly stronger than you.”

Naruto slumped in defeat on her left as the Fifth Hokage turned her honey eyed gaze on her.

“Sakura Haruno. You proved yourself efficient in designing and executing a strategy against a known opponent as well as the beginnings of a mastery over water an earth release techniques. You have also shown promising ability for genjutsu and medical ninjutsu. Your abilities are very well rounded. For these reasons you have been awarded the rank of chuunin.”

Sakura nearly fainted. It was unbelievable that she received the title of chuunin. She never would have thought she would be the first member of Team Kakashi to make chuunin. In all honesty, when Tsunade said she was promoting three gennins, she had expected them to be Shikamaru, Naruto, and Sasuke. She had never been the strongest member of their team. But maybe she didn’t have to be. She didn’t have to be a chakra powerhouse or as strong as Naruto and Sasuke or have really cool powerful jutsu. All she needed was to do well in the areas she was good at and not completely suck in her weakest areas.

The pinkette accepted the green flak vest that the Hokage held out to her and slipped it on over the short sleeved red shirt she was wearing. It donned on her after she finished admiring the way it felt on her that there was still one more vest left, and that meant that Neji had to pass.

“Neji Hyuuga. Your match was interrupted before it was finished. But before then you showed yourself capable of defending attacking an opponent’s chakra network. In the first two stages yourself capable of fighting intelligently, and in the finals you did not engage Gaara. For these reasons you have been promoted to the rank of chuunin.”

Neji accepted the vest with quiet thanks and a pleased smile.

“Now all of you get out of my office. Except you, Sakura.”

Said girl returned to her place in front of Tsunade’s desk as the other five gennin trooped out. Shikamaru shot her a look telling her that he would be waiting in the hall for her.
The door closed behind him and Sakura turned her attention to the Hokage. Tsunade had taken a seat behind her desk again and was looking at her with a very serious face. Sakura was starting to sweat as she thought of all the reasons that the Hokage would call her back.

“Your senseis, Kakashi and Kurenai, along with the Head Medic what’s his name,” Shizune had opened her mouth to inform Tsunade but the blonde steamrolled over any attempt she made to speak, “have informed me of you excellent chakra control. The Head Medic has told me of your remarkable progress as a medic and suggested that I take you on as an apprentice.”

Sakura sighed in relief. He had already informed her of his decision to have her learn under Tsunade. She was so glad that she hadn’t been held back for something horrible.

“However,” Sakura’s heart plummeted, “I’m going to be very busy rebuilding and running a village. So if I take you on as my apprentice I expect you to work harder than you ever have in your life.” Sakura grinned brightly and danced in place. “There will be no excuses, absolutely no nonsense, and you will not quit. You will get up at the crack of dawn to train. You will train until your bones ache and your muscles are aching and you can’t move from the pain. Then you will get up and do it again the next day. We will start tomorrow at four. Understand?”

Sakura nodded frantically and surprised the Hokage by throwing her arms around her in a hug before dashing out the door. She couldn’t wait to tell her team, Neji, Shikamaru, and Shikamaru’s parents that she had been chosen as Tsunade-sama’s apprentice.

-Chuunin-

Sakura had a celebration of her promotion with her team (a dinner actually paid for by her sensei who usually skipped out and left them to foot the bills), a formal congratulatory dinner with the Uchihas (which had her beyond confused. Why would they prepare a fancy dinner for her when their own son didn’t receive a promotion and had spent the last three days trying to kill her just by glaring at her), and was treated to a reasonably priced congratulations lunch with Shikamaru and his family (it was the best party in her opinion.)

She had managed to moderately surprise Tsunade-sama during their first training session. Tsunade-shishou, as she demanded the pink haired chuunin call her, explained the importance of dodging as a skill for all medics to know. A medic would be of no use to the team if they were taken down. It was the medic’s responsibility to stay out of the way and provide support.

Unless, of course her shishou continued, they were successful at dodging every attack aimed their way. And so, with a devious smirk, no warning and a blindingly fast fist aimed for her ribcage, Sakura began her lessons on extreme dodging.

She had ducked the punch, which connected with the tree behind. The bark didn’t dent. The tree didn’t fall over. Tsunade had literally blown the tree into smithereens. Toothpick sized pieces of tree rained down on the teacher and student, and Sakura was infinitely glad that that fist did not connect. She shuddered, imagining what her body would look like if her shishou had hit her. She didn’t think they would even find toothpick sized pieces.

Sakura leapt back, not wanting to be anywhere near the blonde’s range of hitting. Luckily for her, her shishou was done throwing destructive punches at her. Unluckily for her, Tsunade had started hurling metal balls the size of bowling balls at a rapid fire pace as if she was whipping around tennis balls and expected her to not get hit by a single one.

She officially decided her newest sensei was crazier than Gai-sensei.

-Chuunin-
Sakura had only been a chuunin for six days before she was assigned her first B-rank mission. Standing on either side of her in Tsunade-shishou’s office was Neji and Shikamaru. She wondered why Tsunade was sending three newly crowned chuunin on their first mission without at least an experienced chuunin. She also wondered about the IQ overkill that had been assembled.

She was disappointed to discover it was only a currier mission and the most trouble they could expect on the road was bandits. Nevertheless, Sakura bowed and accepted the scroll that Tsunade-sama needed them to deliver to Suna, and the three chuunin agreed to meet at the gate in an hour.

The mission was mind blowingly numb. The team of three didn’t run into any bandits or any other trouble. They reached Suna with ease, handed over the scroll to the temporary council man in charge, and started their return journey immediately. None of them felt the need to stay overnight in a village that had a hand in partially destroying theirs.

They were back in Konoha within a week and giving their mission report, which was extremely short considering it was four short sentences, Travel was fine. Reached Suna in three days. Handed over scroll to their pro tem leader. Left for Konoha immediately after completion.

Tsunade dismissed them with a wave of her hand. “We should go out and have a mission complete dinner.” Sakura suggested once they were outside her shishou’s office.

Both boys paused their stride to look at her. Tsunade had said the three of them had done well on their mission and that they could expect another one soon because Konoha needed revenue to rebuild and that meant an increase in missions. Sakura hoped to make dinner after a mission a tradition. It would be something that only the three of them did. It would bring them closer together and her shishou had said she was likely to send the same team out again.

“Ne, Sakura, I can’t. It’s my turn to take care of the deer.” That’s right. Ever since she had moved in with the Naras, Shikamaru split his chores with her, one of which was caring for the deer they used to make medicine. The two had decided switching duties every other week was fair.

“I can go with you, Sakura.” Said girl beamed at Neji.

The two parted from Shikamaru, heading towards restaurant district. They chose a cozy restaurant that was known for its tempura and fried shrimp and other seafood dishes. The waitress sat them down cooing about young love and how cute Sakura and Neji looked together. She was so embarrassed that she didn’t look at Neji until it was time to order.

The awkwardness all but disappeared when the food arrived and Sakura tried to cast about for something to talk about. “Was your family excited about your promotion?”

Neji gave her a slight confused look. “Of course they were. Becoming a chuunin in my first exam was an honor and Lord Hiashi was pleased with my advancement. Why wouldn’t they be happy?”

Sakura hurried to dissuade him of the idea that he thought she meant they were unhappy. “It’s just, your family isn’t big on showing emotions is all. So I thought maybe they would just see it as a stepping stone to reaching jounin or something like that.”

The brunette tilted his head a little to the side. “Well, yes, but while it is expected of me to become at least a jounin, they are proud of my accomplishment. Hiashi-sama was particularly impressed that I learned Revolving Heaven Technique. It’s extremely difficult to learn and I’m the youngest to do so.”
The rest of dinner was spent discussing their different abilities and their performances during the chūnin exams. Neji chuckled when she recounted Team 7’s experience in the Forest of Death when she revealed that the “Mighty Sasuke Uchiha” had been taken down by a snake bite to the ankle and said it wasn’t a wonder why the boy had not made chūnin. He was completely unaware of his surroundings.

Neji paid for their dinner although she tried to split the bill with him. In the end she gave up, promising that she paid for the next one, and let Neji walk her home when he offered.

The walk home was silent, but it wasn’t an uncomfortable one. It was companionable and neither felt the need to break it. So Sakura enjoyed the walk home. She was surprised to see just how fast the renovations to the village were taken place. She knew that a fair bit of damage had been dealt, but walking down the streets now, it looked as if the attack had never happened.

Neji accompanied her all the way to the Naras’ front gate. “Sakura,” he said as she waved good night, “I enjoyed tonight and would like the opportunity to take you out again.”

“To another team dinner?” she asked confused.

“No.” he smiled. “I would like to get to know you better. I want to take you on a date.”

It took a lot of willpower to keep her jaw from dropping and making her look like a complete fool. Ever since Sasuke had called her pathetic, Sakura had put her desire for everything boy related on the back burner. She had even contemplated the idea of dating once she started taking her training seriously. She didn’t think she’d have the time for it, and the way her days filled up with multiple senseis all teaching her something different she knew she had been right. Besides, dating would only be a distraction and that was one thing she didn’t need.

But, her mind argued as she looked at Neji who was waiting patiently for an answer and managing to not look nervous at the thought of being rejected, she thought it should be possible for her to have a social life too. In fact, it would probably be the best. All training and no play would make for a dull life. Neji respected her first as a friend and then as a kunoichi. He had never looked down on her like Sasuke had, and he was just as good looking as her brooding teammate.

“Yes. I’d like that.” Sakura gave him her signature smile.

Neji left saying that he would pick her up tomorrow afternoon at six. Sakura’s smile never left her face as she entered her house. She bypassed the kitchen where she found Shikamaru munching on a couple of rice balls.

“What’s got you so happy? You look like your walking on clouds.”

Sakura flashed a bright grin at him. “Neji asked me on a date. He’s taking me out tomorrow.” With that said she flounced out of the room, leaving behind a choking Shikamaru who was protesting that there was no way his sister was allowed to date.

She readied for bed, a large grin still present on her face. Shikamaru’s reaction reminded her of how her parents would have reacted, and the pain that she associated with anything that reminded her of her mother and father wasn’t as strong. It relieved her to realize that while she still missed them, it didn’t hurt as much to think of them. She was also so happy to hear that Shikamaru considered her a sister. She had been an only child and had always wondered what it would be like to have a brother or sister and she couldn’t be happier that she finally got one, even if he probably was the laziest brother in the Five Elemental Nations.

The rosette fell asleep that night with her smile still on her face, feeling the happiest she had ever
been since her parents’ deaths.

-Life took on a pattern. Training day in and day out all day every day, except for when she went on missions. The majority of her missions were with Neji and Shikamaru, but about ten percent of them occurred with other chuunin and sometimes a jounin. Some of the notable ones were Iwane Akame (he wore an eye patch), Hayase (one of the chuunin disguised as a gennin during the first part of the chuunin exams), and Hana Inuzuka (Kiba’s older sister).

The only thing odd about her new routine was her missions with Shikamaru and Neji. Chuunin teams were fixed like gennin teams. Members for a mission were decided on what skills were needed to complete. Often times you found yourself working with someone you don’t know. But that wasn’t the case with Sakura, Neji, and Shikamaru. Ninety percent of their missions were done together.

Her training with Tsunade had increased by an insane degree. She was learning how to think on her feet and could successfully avoid most of her shishou’s attacks. And just when she thought she had reached the end and it couldn’t get any harder, Tsunade increased the power behind her attacks, her speed, and her movements became more unpredictable than Naruto and she wound up getting punched through several trees.

But Sakura wouldn’t give up the chaos that was her life for anything. Her life was perfect. She had a new family with the Naras (she had finally been convinced to call Shikaku and Yoshina father and mother and Shikamaru she already considered a brother), her first date with Neji had gone well and the couple had been on three more since then, and her training was getting tougher every day which meant she was growing stronger each day.

She was tearing through her medical training. Tsunade-shishou had her continuing to practice basic medical ninjutsu until it was instinctive to use medical chakra and she could heal simple cuts and bruises without looking. Sakura was progressing up the Injury Severity Scale (ISS), an established medical score to assess trauma severity, at an alarming, in her teacher’s opinion, rate. It correlates with mortality, morbidity and hospitalization time after trauma. It is used to define the term major trauma. Six months ago she had only been allowed to work on Level 1 injuries, which were minor, like paper cuts and skinned knees. Since then she had pushed through Level 2: Moderate (sprains), Level 3: Serious (third degree burns), Level 4: Severe (bone fractures), and was currently on Level 5: Critical. She wasn’t allowed to work Level 6 cases because they were untreatable.

Sakura was becoming well known amongst the medical ninja working at the hospital. She was quickly rising up the ranks, reaching the point where she was a few people below Shizune and the Head Medic. A lot of the missions she had been on lately she was there specifically because of her medical ninjutsu. It gave her such a rush of feeling each time she healed a fellow shinobi. She felt a sense of accomplishment when all her hard work paid off and she could see her team safely home.

The rosette started thinking about her old team. She hadn’t been to see them in a while. Perhaps she could convince Kakashi-sensei to hold a team practice on her day off so she could spar with Naruto and Sasuke.

Her plans for a reunion for Team 7 were put on the hold with the arrival of a courier ninja calling her to Tsunade’s office. She wondered what mission she was going on this time.
“What?”

“You heard me, Sakura. Since you are my apprentice, I’m putting you to work on some of this paperwork.” Tsunade declared.

“Shishou, you must be joking. I’m your apprentice, as in student. Not your assistant.” Sakura growled. This is not what she wanted to spend her afternoon doing.

The blonde Hokage frowned deeply for a minute while Sakura stood impatiently waiting for her dismissal. “Well, then. Now you’re both, just like Shizune. You are now my apprentice and my assistant. So get started!”

Sakura gapped at her shishou and was rewarded with a long finger pointing to a second desk that she had never noticed stacked high with papers and scrolls. She settled behind the desk with a sigh knowing there was no arguing with Tsunade when she was annoyed or angry, which were both common whenever she had to deal with the never ending paperwork that came with being the Hokage of a ninja village.

The pair worked mostly in silence except for when Sakura had to ask Tsunade to explain some of the legal jargon or ask her opinion on something. And just like that, doing her shishou’s paperwork became part of her daily schedule.

She realized ruefully that with all the responsibilities that came with being the Hokage’s apprentice and assistant and her training that she would probably never have time to catch up with her gennin team any time soon.

Not that it turned out to matter. One of the mission reports she had to file was filled by Jiraiya, detailing Naruto’s training. When she asked her shishou, the blonde replied that Naruto had gone on a two year training journey with her teammate a couple weeks ago that doubled as protection from the Akatsuki, which was a criminal organization full of S-rank rogue ninjas that were after Jinchuriki like Naruto.

Sakura clenched her jaw. A criminal organization after Naruto. Her palm bled as she dug her nails into it. She would not allow them to lay a finger on Naruto. She would keep him safe. She would grow stronger so that she could fight beside Naruto and protect him. It was a promise.

However, strength wasn’t everything. She remembered the four clauses of the Medic’s Code.

\[
\text{No medic ninja shall ever stop medical treatment until the lives of their party members come to an end. No medic ninja shall ever stand on the front line. No medic ninja shall ever die until they are the last of their platoon.}
\]

To Sakura, the most important one was the fourth clause. \textit{Only those medic ninja who have mastered the Strength of a Hundred Technique and the ninja art Creation Rebirth are permitted to discard the above mentioned laws.}

If she wanted to be able to protect Naruto if the Akatsuki ever came looking for him, she would have to be on the front lines with him. And in order to do that she had to master Tsunade’s Creation Rebirth technique and her Strength of a Hundred technique.

“Tsunade-shishou.” The Hokage looked up from her own pile of paperwork. “I want you to teach me the Creation Rebirth technique.”

Tsunade studied her student’s face. Determination shone in her green eyes which practically lit up. It was like a fire had been lit and the pinkette would not take no for an answer.
Sakura could say that Creation Rebirth was the most demanding and difficult technique she had learned to date hands down. There was no competition. Compared to this, elemental jutsu, medical ninjutsu, taijutsu, genjutsu, and insane strength were as easy as boiling water.

The Creation Rebirth technique was the absolute pinnacle of medical ninjutsu, the ultimate regeneration technique. By releasing the great volume of stored chakra at once, the body's cell division is forcibly stimulated by proteins, reconstructing all organs and all tissues making up the human body. From what she understood, the technique itself did not regenerate the old cells; rather it hastened the creation of new ones through division. It gave the user a sense of immortality as long as they had the chakra.

Tsunade also warned her that the body's cells can only split a certain number of times in a lifetime, and that by using this technique she would be shortening her lifespan. Sakura figured it was a relatively small amount of time taken off, for the cells in the body was constantly dividing; some only had lifespans of a few hours. But, as long as she was careful using this technique, she wouldn’t be dying any time soon.

But, before she could even get started on the Creation Rebirth technique, Sakura had to first learn Yin Seal: Release. This seal would allow her to store the chakra that was necessary to use the Creation Rebirth.

The problem was Fuinjutsu, otherwise known as sealing jutsus, were the most difficult techniques to learn. The majority of Fuinjutsu were classified as S-rank. It left her feeling discouraged at times. How would she, a thirteen year old who had been a kunoichi for a little over a year and a chuunin for six months so far, ever be able to successfully perform an S-rank jutsu like the Yin Seal?

Sakura shut those thoughts away before they overwhelmed her. She would not be beaten by a single seal. She would not let this stand in her way of learning the Creation Rebirth and eventually the Strength of a Hundred techniques so that she would be able to heal her comrades right on the front lines. She had promised herself when she woke up in the hospital after the invasion that she would become a medical ninja that rivaled Tsunade-shishou.

After watching Sakura’s failed attempts to direct her chakra to her forehead and form the Yin Seal, Tsunade informed her protégé that the key to focusing chakra for the Yin Seal was to mediated and focus on its placement on the body. Sakura was released from training for the rest of the day so she could go home, or to any quiet place, and meditate.

The pink haired girl hurried home, barely stopping to say “I’m home” to the two people she now considered her second parents as she rushed to her room and locked the door behind. She made herself comfortable on her bed, sitting with her spine straight, legs crossed, and hands folded in her lap. She let her mind and body relaxed and focused on breathing. Once she was thinking of absolutely nothing she focused her attention on her Yin Seal.

Her chakra sprang to life inside her, tingling as it drifted towards her navel. Later Sakura would wondered why her navel instead of her forehead like Tsunade-shishou’s Yin Seal, but would decide that it was different for each person most likely and that they probably wouldn’t be able to test that theory because there weren’t many ninja with the chakra control necessary.

Sakura’s meditation lasted most of the day. She sat crossed legged on her bed, not getting up for lunch. Her concentration remained uninterrupted until dinner, in which Shikamaru insisted she had to come eat. If he hadn’t been eating more since he made chuunin she would have called him a hypocrite.
She stood up and stretched, relishing the sound of her back cracking and thinking that it was ironic a technique designed for relaxation made her muscles sore. Sakura stood in front of her full length mirror and lifted the hem of her red shirt. Around her navel was not the diamond she had been expecting, but a sakura blossom. She supposed the shape the seal took was unique to each ninja as well.

-SHUUNIN-

Sakura sat at the dinner table next to Shikamaru. Normally, she had no problems eating with the Naras. However, tonight each one of them was fidgeting. While typical for Yoshino, the woman was incapable of staying still (it made Sakura wonder why she had agreed to marry someone as lazy as Shikaku who was just as bad if not worse than Shikamaru), displays of nervousness and unease were unheard for Shikamaru and Shikaku. It made her uncomfortable and she wanted nothing more than to flee to her room and meditate for a couple more hours.

Yoshino spoke first. “Sakura dear, you know Shikaku and I consider you to be our own daughter. I’ve always wanted one.”

Sakura nodded, uncertain where Shikamaru’s mother was going with this daughter talk. “Well, Shikaku and I have been discussing, Shikamaru too, it was his idea,” she added as her son cleared his throat pointedly, “we would like to make it official.”

The rosette looked at each Nara in turn. Even though she had heard what Yoshino was saying and could understand its implications, she found it almost unbelievable. Seven months ago when Shikamaru brought her to his house she had never imagined that she would stay and live there. But now they were offering to adopt her, to make her one of them.

“Are you sure? You don’t have to adopt me. I’d be just fine still living here without that.”

It was strange to see all three Naras glaring at her. “Of course we want to.” Shikaku said gruffly. “We wouldn’t offer if we didn’t want it. You already are one of use. We just want to sign the paperwork to make it official.”

“Yeah, sis, my mother prefers you over me anyway.” Shikamaru teased causing his mother to mock glare at him and assert that she loved them equally.

Sakura’s eyes sparkled with tears as Shikaku placed the already filled out forms in front of her. All that was needed was her own signature. She shakily signed her name.

Setting the pen on the table and staring at Yoshino’s and Shikaku’s and her signatures on the page it hit her that she had a family again. It was no longer that she just thought of the Naras as a second family, they really were her mother, father, and brother now. Sakura leapt out of her chair, not caring that she knocked it over, and launched herself at Shikamaru.

Her new brother’s arms wrapped around her as she laid her head on his shoulder and cried tears of joy. Her new mother and father came around the table to envelop the two of them in a hug. Sakura officially decided this was the best day of her life. It totally trumped graduating the academy and being Tsunade-sama’s apprentice. She had a family to call her own.

-SHUUNIN-

Since Sakura trained early in the morning with the Hokage, which meant she was up before the sun appeared, she had offered to deliver the adoption forms personally. She arrived earlier than normal at the tower to meet up with her shishou, and as per usual entered her office without knocking. Tsunade had expressly told her that knocking wasn’t necessary because she would be
the only person in the tower besides her ANBU protection squad.

Today, however, that wasn’t the case. Sakura came to a halt at the sight of Kakashi-sensei. She thought that the world had to be ending because that was the only reason that her silver haired gennin sensei would be caught dead in the Hokage’s office this early in the morning. Said jounin looked equally surprised to see her. Apparently, despite knowing that his pink haired student was the Hokage’s apprentice, the man had no clue that she was training in the morning. For Kami’s sake not even Gai was training at this hour.

“Sakura, come on in. Don’t worry about Kakashi. He won’t be here much longer and then we’ll get right to training.” Tsunade waved her in. “What’s that?” she asked as Sakura stood at the window behind her, eyeing the papers clutched in her hand.

Sakura presented them with a flourish. “They’re adoption papers. The Naras officially adopted me.”

Both her senseis congratulated her as Tsunade signed her name to the papers making the adoption legal. “What do you say we take a break today and celebrate?”

Sakura debated the idea, not sure what Tsunade’s definition of celebrate was but certain that it involved sake. Then again, everything Tsunade did involved sake in some manner. What harm could it do?

Apparently more than she thought. Kakashi had denied Tsunade’s invitation to join them and left via the window, pausing to ruffle Sakura’s pink locks. Tsunade had shrugged, saying the more for them, and dug out a bottle of sake out of her bottom draw and two cups. Sakura, knowing that it was illegal because she was way underage but not caring because it wasn’t like anyone could get her in trouble because it was her shishou that gave her the alcohol, drank with just as much abandon as Tsunade.

Unfortunately for her, she did not have her shishou’s ability to use chakra while drunk nor could she help her liver detoxify the alcohol rapidly entering her bloodstream. So, when Shizune came into the office with the first of the day’s paperwork to file, her job while Tsunade and Sakura were training, she found a tipsy blonde and a trashed pinkette.

Tsunade’s black haired assistant shrieked and raged and gave Sakura a pounding migraine and lecture the two women on responisibility before she nearly killed Sakura by swinging her in circles when she discovered the pinkette’s adoption. Shizune hurried the liver’s breakdown of the sake and cured Sakura’s headache but refused to do the same for Tsunade. Then she warned Tsunade not to give Sakura any sort of alcohol until she was legal, though preferably never again.

The Godaime Hokage healed herself and ignored Shizune’s warning, saying it was a one time occasion so of course it would never happen again. Then she set both assistants to filing paperwork, conveniently forgetting that she had given Sakura the day off.

Sakura went home that day vowing to never drink again.

-CHUUNIN-

After two weeks of meditating every chance she got Sakura felt she was ready to give the Creation Rebirth technique a try.

She almost lost her resolve when Tsunade-shishou explained how she was going to practice. Sakura knew that the technique sped up the creation of new cells; however, she conveniently forgot the reason for needing those new cells. Tsunade’s idea was for her to stand still and let her
shove a kunai into Sakura’s gut so she could give the jutsu a try.

Sakura wasn’t at all reassured by the fact that her shishou would be there to heal her if she failed.

Getting a kunai straight to the gut wasn’t fun. It was agonizing and Sakura never wanted to feel it again. And she was pretty damn sure her sensei had aimed for her intestines on purpose. With a cry of “Yin Seal: Release!” she released the chakra she had been storing in the sakura blossom around her belly button and watched amazed as her intestines put themselves back together and the hole closed itself up. The only way to tell she had ever been injured was the dark patch on her shirt that had been soaked with her blood.

-Chuunin-

Tsunade was stunned. She watched as her student successfully released her Yin Seal and used her Creation Rebirth jutsu. She had created that seal and this jutsu herself. It took her years to do so. And despite being the brains behind the jutsu and the best medical ninja of her time, Tsunade did not manage it on her first try. Nor on her second, third, or fourth tries.

But Sakura, who was currently in the midst of a victory dance, had. The teenager had only needed one try. Sakura’s chakra controlled had to be even better than her own. The theory behind the technique was easy. Release a large amount of chakra and focus it towards the injury and the chakra would do the rest unconsciously. In practice it was harder to accomplish.

The girl was a medical prodigy and Tsunade wouldn’t be surprised when the day came that Sakura surpassed her and became the best medic of her generation and every one before her.

“Don’t be celebrating just yet, Sakura. We need to make sure that wasn’t a fluke.” Tsunade let out a little of her sadistic tendencies as the rosette looked at her in horror.

-Chuunin-

She didn’t know how it happened, but Sakura had found herself cornered into attending a second dinner at the Uchiha household.

This dinner was much better. Since everyone already knew her parents were dead, courtesy of the last gathering, there were no awkward questions. Mikoto was still an uncontrollable force of nature that mother henned all three children (she was rather disappointed that Naruto wasn’t in the village) and asked a stream of questions on how they had been.

It was not surprising that Sasuke had been training himself into exhaustion in preparation for the chuunin exams that were held every six months. With the incident this year the second chuunin selection exam scheduled in October was cancelled, but Sasuke was determined to enter and pass the upcoming one next April. Although Sakura wondered what he would do for teammates with her already a chuunin and Naruto out of reach for two years.

Itachi only said he was busy with ANBU missions that he could not talk about, which was understandable because all ANBU missions were classified. Though Sakura thought it extremely unhealthy for him to do so many missions in such a short period, (he had just admitted to having to go on more missions than usual, seventeen this month) and said so before her brain could catch up to her mouth and stop it from practically berating the eldest Uchiha son for completing missions as was expected and ordered of him.

He didn’t take it personally thankfully, laughing off her comment and saying that he had requested a week off. Sakura had to hold her tongue to stop herself from saying he should take two at minimum but should really push for a month.
Then the Uchiha Matriarch fixated her dark eyes on Sakura and questioned what had changed since she had last visited. The pinkette was more than happy to answer this question and babbled on about her training as Tsunade’s apprentice, her recent adoption into the Nara Head family, and her consecutive successes with the Creation Rebirth technique.

Then she sat back quite pleased with her ability to make Uchihas react and enjoyed the gob smacked expressions on all four Uchihas’ faces. Mikoto’s eyes had gone wide in surprise and her mouth fell upon to form and ‘o.’ Sasuke looked like he had swallowed wrong due to the shock and he was coughing. She didn’t know if his enlarged eyes were due to his surprise or the fact he was having trouble breathing. Itachi’s expression wasn’t as pronounced as his mother’s and brother’s, but he still showed his surprise with the slight widening of his eyes and the raising of both dark eyebrows. Even Fugaku appeared to be taken aback, although his only show of it was the loss of his grip on his fork, which clanged on his plate.

“That’s unbelievable, Sakura-chan!” Mikoto gushed. “It’s a great achievement for someone your age. You must be very proud of yourself.”

Sakura turned redder than their Sharigan eyes and said it was all due to Tsunade-shishou and a lot of hard work.

Sakura left that dinner much happier with the outcome and not unwilling to step foot inside the Uchiha clan’s gates, not knowing that Fugaku and Mikoto were discussing how she most definitely would be able to heal the adverse effects of their clan’s kekkei genkai if she could master the Hokage’s signature jutsu in only six months. Now they knew they only had to wait for the day when they could ask her to look into their situation.

-CHELVIN-

Sakura was totally caught off guard when her boyfriend told her his uncle wanted to meet her. She and Neji had been dating for six months. She wasn’t expecting a meet your significant other’s parents, or uncle as it was in Neji’s case, until they decided if they were serious, if they even reached the point where they could even considered getting married.

She agreed to attend the dinner the next night hoping that his relatives didn’t think their relationship was set in stone. Neji was her first boyfriend and they had only gone on a handful of dates in the last six months, although not as many as they would have liked due to conflicting schedules. She didn’t consider their dinner tradition after a completed mission as a date because Shikamaru accompanied them most times. Sakura wanted to let this relationship play out and develop between them. She didn’t want outside interference from his uncle or clan.

‘If possible,’ she thought as she sat next to Neji at a table with his uncle and cousins, ‘this dinner is worse than my first dinner with the Uchihas.’

While the dinner with the Uchihas had had a rough bump when the conversation turned towards her parents, the awkward silence was preferred to the Spanish Inquisition she was receiving. And she wasn’t exaggerating. As soon as the first course (he had actually prepared for the full seven course meal) was whisked of the table by Hyuugas she supposed were branch members, Lord Hiashi started asking questions.

“How old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

“Your birthday?”
March 28.”

“You are a kunoichi, correct?”

Sakura was insulted by that question. “Yes.”

“Rank?”

“Chuunin.”

“Are your parents shinobi?”

“They’re dead.” She was pleased to see him wince at her answer. He certainly deserved that for thinking that her parents had to be ninja. “But they were civilians. They owned a bakery.” Not so pleased with the frown when her heard her parents’ former occupation.

“I was adopted by Yoshino and Shikaku Nara a few weeks ago.” Did she see approval in his eyes?

“Your abilities?” Hiashi continued.

“I use earth and water release ninjutsu. I’m good at strategic thinking, improvising, and dodging. I’m very talented with medical jutsu and genjutsu and have excellent chakra control. I am Tsunade-sama’s apprentice.” Oh, she had managed to surprise him with that bit of information too. “I am learning to use her inhuman strength, can heal most severely injured patients at the hospital, and can use her Creation Rebirth technique.”

Her abilities impressed the youngest Hyuuga, and she managed to surprise the other three. She had planned tell Neji on their next date or after their next mission together, whichever came first, but now was as good a time as any.

His inquisition, for that was the only thing it could be called, continued. Hiashi asked about the missions she had completed and she smartly, and a little sarcastically, answered all the same as his nephew. Sakura saw Neji bite his lip out of the corner of her eye. She was pretty sure he wanted to laugh at her flippant comment but wouldn’t do so in front of his uncle.

Hanabi on the other hand had no such reservations, and she didn’t stop when her father leveled her with the pupil-less white glare that made Sakura envy the young girl’s ability to not be unnerved. Or maybe she was used to receiving such glares and they weren’t effective anymore. Either way, Sakura wished that that look didn’t make her feel so uncomfortable.

Sakura continued to answer questions on her childhood, her grades at the academy, and her experience on Team 7. She simply loved retelling how their first C-rank mission had snowballed into an A-rank mission dealing with Zabuza Momochi, Demon of the Hidden Mist. She quite gleefully mentioned that her, Naruto and Sasuke had rescued their sensei from Zabuza’s water prison with one of her plans and had defeated them in the battle on the bridge.

Without pause she launched into a recount of the chuunin exams, explaining how she had no trouble noticing the genjutsu on the second flow and answered all the insanely difficult designed questions on the first test without cheating. Sakura detailed her team’s victory over the gennin team from Mist and how she protected her unconscious teammates from the dangerous team of Sound ninja and received the second scroll they needed and how she carried her team to the tower on her own before the third day ended. She replayed her match against Dosu in the preliminary rounds and the one against Shino in the finals.

She gathered by the speechlessness that struck the two females and their father that she had
exceeded his expectations. Sakura almost thought she had dumbfounded the man before he continued eating like nothing had happened. Then again she still may have because he stopped asking her questions after that.

When little Hanabi burst into an explosion of questions, Sakura decided that the girl was the most un-Hyuuga like Hyuuga she had ever met, and that included her sister that was shy. She peppered Sakura with questions on why she chose to use the jutsu she did, and who taught her genjutsu, and could Sakura teach her medical jutsu, and she had earth nature too could Sakura teach her that as well.

Her boyfriend tried to hush up the young girl thinking that she had had enough of the questions, but Sakura enjoyed the young girl’s enthusiasm and had no problem explaining her strategies and the decisions behind her jutsu choices. She even offered for Hanabi to come and visit her at the hospital or at the Naras’ in the afternoon so she could teach her some basic medical ninjutsu or earth techniques.

The rest of the conversation was held by Sakura and Hanabi and consisted of the pinkette fascinating the younger girl with more stories of her missions and a detailed analysis of each one until it satisfied the Hyuuga.

Neji walked her home after the dinner and attempted to apologize for his uncle’s demanding questions and his cousin’s annoying her, but Sakura stopped him by saying she found the dinner delightful and that it went much better than she expected. The brunette nearly choked on air when she mentioned she thought the purpose of the dinner was determine if she was the girl he would be marrying. There was silence, and then they both looked at each other and erupted into laughter.

-CHUUINNIN-

Themed dinners seemed to be the must do thing of the week Sakura thought wryly as she found herself attending her third one in as so many days. Only this time, it was the Naras hosting the dinner. It was the weekly Ino-Shika-Cho dinner that had been skipped during her first month living her, not because she was there but because every ninja was busy with reconstruction or being assigned more missions than usual. Every week after that she had somehow not noticed any of them. Her mother blamed it on her too filled schedule and Sakura agreed that it certainly kept her busy all hours of the day.

Yoshino was of the opinion that it would be best for the Yamanakas and Akimichis to see that she was part of their family first thing, so Sakura had been delegated the duty of answering the door when the two families arrived. In theory, it was the easy job in the world. Greet the guest, introduce herself, invite them in, and tell as little was needed for them to know why she was living with the Naras. In reality it did not go nearly as well.

The knock sounded on the door so Sakura exited the kitchen where she had been helping Yoshino prepare dinner to get. Unluckily for her, Ino was the one to knock on the door.

“Forehead!?” she screeched. “What are you doing here? This is a family gathering. You don’t belong here. Get lost already.” The rest of the platinum blonde’s rant was cut off by her father’s grip on her shoulder.

“Mou, Ino, you’re making such a big deal of it.” Shikamaru slinked out of the dining room. “Just come on in and let my sister get back to the kitchen. She makes a mean chocolate cake.”

Sakura was positive that he had purposefully made it sound like he had been calling her his sister since he was born just to annoy his teammate. That was probably the reason he mentioned her cake making skills too, because Ino was “on a diet” and couldn’t indulge in chocolate.
But he managed to successfully distract the blonde harpy, who started bombarding Shikamaru with questions that Sakura could still hear as she returned to the kitchen to finish frosting her triple chocolate German cake that had become the favorite dessert of the Nara household. She very much appreciated Chouji’s “Huh, Sakura, what are you doing here?” before he dashed off down the familiar hallways with a call of “is that barbequed ribs?” followed by his parents.

Sakura helped Yoshino serve dinner and took her seat next to Shikamaru, Ino across the table from him looked very put out by this. She guessed that the blonde had used to sit next to her brother and was very unhappy with her for taking what she deemed her spot.

“So forehead, what are you doing here?” her one time friend sneered.

Sakura sighed, turning her head to silently admonish Shikamaru. After seven months of living together the brother and sister had gotten pretty good at reading each other, and Shikamaru was screaming “I delayed her question, but you still have to explain and you owe me for the distraction. Girls are so troublesome.”

Luckily for her Yoshino started explaining before she finished conferring with Shikamaru, and Sakura’s tragedy made Ino shut her always moving mouth. She even looked vaguely guilty and horrified at asking such an insensitive question. A second glance at Shikamaru told Sakura that he wasn’t all that happy with the girl he practically grew up with asking about things she didn’t need to know.

Ino’s behavior didn’t get any better was the night wore on. She did her best to insult Sakura with subtlety, but most of her attempts were cut off with a sharp reprimand from one of her parents and not one of them bothered her because they were all untrue. Ino mostly tried targeting her abilities as a ninja, saying how it was a shame that she wasn’t promoted to chuunin and her win against Shino was a fluke and that she wouldn’t amount to much. Sakura felt vicious delight when Yoshino bragged about her daughter being the Hokage’s apprentice and her mastering one of Tsunade’s techniques. Ino had been the only one furious with that information.

There was also a spark of jealousy in her blue eyes when the topic of her relationship with Neji cropped up. Despite Ino’s claims to be in love with Sasuke, her eyes strayed towards any well connected talented shinobi, and in her eyes, Neji was one of those ideal boyfriends, just her type: tall, skilled and handsome ninja she could marry and retire after reaching chuunin and be a housewife and live comfortably.

Sakura thought Ino was ridiculous and a waste space if her only goal was to become a housewife that could live in luxury. She would be just another shinobi, nothing special.

But, this dinner was easily the most comfortable dinner of the week. The rosette ignored Ino’s presence and spoke mostly with Chouji, eager to learn about his friendship with Shikamaru since her brother seemed closer to him than he did to Ino and the three of them grew up as the next generation of Ino-Shika-Cho.

Dinner finished and she was just about to fetch her chocolate masterpiece when third knock sounded. Sakura knew that no one else was expected to show up tonight. Apparently it was common knowledge amongst the older generation that tonight was their team dinner night. Shikaku motioned for her to answer, most likely thinking like she did that the Hokage had to call someone in for a mission.

Therefore Sakura was totally surprised when she was tackled by a small brown haired blur instead of greeted with a messenger ninja when she opened the door.

“Hi, Sakura. You said I could come over when I had the time. I want to learn some medical jutsu
today. After listening to you yesterday I want to be as great a medical ninja as you. Can you teach me something please?”

If she hadn’t known that it was Hanabi Hyuuga, Sakura would have never believed a Hyuuga capable of begging. But she was, puppy dog pout and tears drawn up to make it look like she was about to cry and the whole shebang.

“Well, Hanabi, now’s not actually a good time for me.” Sakura flinched as her admirer’s face collapsed. “The family’s currently having a ritual get together. But,” she hurried to add is it seemed like Hanabi was about to cry for real, “why don’t you come in and join us. I made a delicious chocolate cake for dessert and when can see if there’s some time after dinner to show you something.”

Hanabi’s whole face perked up. “And I promise if we can’t do anything today I’ll come over to the Hyuuga compound tomorrow.”

“You should come anyway.” The nine year old said as she bounced down the hall beside Sakura. Sakura laughed, “We’ll see.”

“Who is this, honey?” her mother asked as Sakura reentered with the cake in hand and Hanabi trailing.

“This is Hanabi. She was looking to start learning some medical ninjutsu, but I invited her in for cake since I couldn’t teach her anything right now. I hope that’s okay with you all.” Sakura just remembered that this wasn’t just her parents’ dinner, but the Akimichis’ and the Yamanakas’ as well.

“Of course it’s alright, Sakura-chan,” Chouji’s mother answered. “It’ll be no trouble at all for young Hanabi to join us. And your cooking is just so fantabulous that I’m sure it would be a shame for her to miss out on your dessert.”

The pinkette’s face turned red at the praise as she pulled in another chair for the girl that appeared to becoming her stalker and slice her triple chocolate German cake. The cake was well received by everyone at the table, aside from Ino who glared at her piece as if it had committed some terrible offense to her, which Sakura mused it probably did just by sitting in front of her, and shoved it aside to be stolen by Chouji.

After first bite, Hanabi added cooking to the list of things Sakura had to teach her, which had grown from earth and medical ninjutsu to include cooking, genjutsu, weapons training (something she had never professed to be skilled at and wondered why she would ask it of her), stamina, and strategic thinking.

Yoshino had jumped at the chance to show off her new daughter’s ability and suggested that since Sakura was going to show Hanabi something anyway, why didn’t she show them all what she could do. Sakura was surprised that the Yamanakas and Akimichis were just as interested in seeing her healing abilities.

With ten pairs of eyes fixated on her, the pink haired girl grabbed the knife she used to cut the cake and slashed her left forearm before anyone could cry out for her to stop. Hanabi’s pearl colored eyes were riveted on her right hand as it was encased in green chakra and she watched amazed as Sakura’s wound closed up until it looked like it had never been injured.

The table was silent.

“That was so cool! You have to teach me that first, Sakura-sensei!” Hanabi crowed.
‘Sakura-sensei?’ Until Hanabi had attached it to her name, Sakura had never imagined herself as a sensei. Or at least not any time soon. She thought she might take on her own gennin team one day and pass on her knowledge, but that day was far off in the future. But now that it had been mentioned, Sakura found herself enjoying the idea of being a sensei, of being the person the gennin looked up to for guidance and knowledge. She absentmindedly made a mental note to ask Tsunade-shishou the earliest availability to become a jounin-sensei and to find out when the jounin exams were.

-Chuunin-

As it turned out, in order to be a jounin sensei, Sakura had to be a jounin for a year. Unfortunately, the jounin exams weren’t as popular or as common as the chuunin selection exams. The next one not for another three years. But in three years’ time Hanabi would be graduating from the academy, and even if she was a jounin before the academy graduation took place, she wouldn’t have been one for a year and wouldn’t have the chance to become the young Hyuuga’s official sensei.

Tsunade said there was one loophole. Sakura could at any time she proved to have jounin level skills in a specific area be listed as a tokubetsu jounin, which was a jounin that specialized in a specific area and was jounin level in it. If she could become a Special High Jounin before Hanabi graduated, there would still be time for her to develop to be an all around jounin so that by the time the girl graduated she would have the title for the necessary length of time and the skills to go with it.

Sakura eagerly jumped on the idea, declaring she would be a tokubetsu medical jounin by the time she was fifteen since she was already apprenticed under Tsunade and being fast tracked through the medical program. It would be much faster than if she tried to develop all her skills to a jounin level or focused on her genjutsu or elemental ninjutsu instead. She had a real talent for chakra control and medical ninjutsu, so the clear choice was to focus almost entirely on her medical training and do enough other training on her own that her skills in her other areas didn’t become rusty.

Hanabi had been following Sakura around so often, always popping up next her at the most unexpected times, that her boyfriend and brother nicknamed her Sakura’s second shadow. The girl certainly seemed to be attached to her. But, far from being annoyed at the pre-gennin’s constant intrusion on her daily life, Sakura used the opportunity the young Hyuuga presented to keep her genjutsu, ninjutsu, and taijutsu skills sharp.

Although Sakura had to wonder if her boyfriend’s youngest cousin was skipping class at the academy to come train with her.

-Chuunin-

An unexpected surprise came to Sakura four months later.

She had been training Hanabi on the Earth Dome jutsu that afternoon when she received the summons to come immediately to the Hokage’s office. Her shishou was pacing on her desk, a clear sign she was agitated, agitation that was probably heightened further by Shizune’s presence which prevented her from digging out a bottle of sake from her secret hidden stash of unending alcohol to soothe her nerves. Tsunade’s pacing immediately put Sakura on edge.

“Normally I would never assign a chuunin to an S-rank mission, but you’re the third best medic in the village and the only one available to go on this mission.” Tsunade faced the window as she spoke, which Sakura didn’t mind because she was trying to discern if she really heard S-rank
mission leave the Hokage’s mouth.

“This mission is extremely dangerous. You will become a temporary member of an ANBU squad.”

“ANBU?” Sakura stuttered.

Under normal circumstances, Tsunade would glare at the one who had interrupted her, but this time she turned away from the window and her face softened when her honey eyes met Sakura’s disbelieving and fearful green ones. “You’re just acting as a medic on this mission. Your only duty is to stay back and support your team. You will not engage in any way. I would never allow one of my ninja to befall serious harm for the sake of a mission they weren’t ready for. The ANBU you’re replacing isn’t really a medic, but he knew enough to get by.

“Your job will be taking the position of the team’s medic.” Tsunade repeated. Sakura nodded her understanding.

“Good, now you will return for debriefing a half hour earlier than normal so I can set you up with a temporary uniform and mask for the mission. Understood?”

“Hai.” Sakura was dismissed. She immediately returned to Hanabi, telling the disheartened girl that her training session for the day was canceled and was put on hold indefinitely because she had no idea as to the length of the mission. Hanabi was unhappy with the set back to her training, but understood that Sakura had a mission to do and that she would be back to continue training her. She left for the Hyuuga compound, calling over her shoulder that Sakura had to come back as soon as possible because she would be ready for the next step.

Sakura informed her family that she would be leaving on a mission the next day and that she didn’t know how long she would be gone. While Yoshino fretted about her being away from home for so long, Shikaku was scrutinizing her. Her father was the jounin commander. Obviously, both as a shinobi himself and the person in charge of the village’s jounin, the man knew that long missions with ambiguous return dates were high ranking; definitely not chuunin ranked. But he didn’t say a word against her participation.

-CHUUNIN-

Even though Sakura was naturally a morning person, something that came in handy when she started training with Tsunade-shishou, she was unnaturally chipper this morning. She blamed it on the excitement and the adrenaline racing through her.

Her mentor sized her up with her eyes and began throwing pieces of an ANBU uniform her way. Sakura left on the bindings she had wrapped around her developing chest, her mesh shirt, and her spandex shorts, and donned the long black sleeved shirt, a pair of pants that was a little too long on her and a little baggy, the smallest chest plate, arm and shin guards that the Hokage could find, and a white ANBU mask depicting a bird.

Before she had met the team she would be joining, Sakura had felt she had seen all the surprises there had been to offer her. Then none other than Itachi Uchiha, the Uchiha clan’s child prodigy that soared through the ranks to be an ANBU captain at thirteen, strolled through the office’s door, closely followed by his cousin, Shisui Uchiha, the most un-Uchiha like Uchiha she had ever met (he was actually happy all the time and showed it), and Genma Shirunai, whom she knew nothing about aside from his constant visits to the hospital for mouth related problems because that senbon never left his mouth.

Did Lady Tsunade really expect her to replace a member of Itachi Uchiha’s team of elite ANBU
and not drag them down or hinder them in some capacity?

Apparently, as she began the mission debriefing, she did. Sakura listened closely to the particulars of the mission despite the foreknowledge that she wouldn’t be involved beyond her duty as a medic. This ANBU squad was being sent to a small town on the border of Fire Country to gather intel on a growing criminal organization (Sakura briefly wondered if it was possible the Akatsuki group that was after Naruto and the other Jinchuriki) called the Hand of God (she nearly let out a groan at the thought of dealing with a criminal religious cult) that worshipped Jashin and was murdering in his name.

It was their job to infiltrate the group and discover their true goal, and if at all possible put a stop to the group. It was starting to sound like the hardest mission Sakura would ever go on and she was scared just to be involved as the medic. Perhaps she would stop her ascension through the ranks with jounin, because she didn’t think she was capable of mission after mission if they were at all like this one.

Sakura was grateful that she had brought her pack with her because it was apparently Itachi’s way to set out immediately, and she would have hated to delay them before they even started because they had to return to her residence to collect her things.

Itachi halted their travel a half hour outside the village gates.

“Unmask.” He ordered. His voice was cold and unrecognizable from the quiet but likeable person she had had dinner with twice that spoke with a voice that sounded like velvet. But all four ninja unmasked.

Tsunade must not have informed Itachi about his replacement member because he actually gapped when she lowered her mask. She thought his reaction was odd until she remembered that she had donned her borrowed ANBU outfit before the debriefing and had not removed it when the three of them had entered. Shisui and Genma were even more shocked than their captain.

“Little girl,” Sakura growled at that name but was ignored; “you can’t possibly be an ANBU. You don’t look older than fourteen. Why did Tsunade-sama put you on our team?”

The pinkette bristled with indignation, despite her looking young, because she was, why was it so hard to believe she was ANBU. If it was possible for Itachi to become a captain at the age of thirteen, why couldn’t they believe that a girl as young as her could possibly be in ANBU?

“I’m not an ANBU. Tsunade-sama placed me on your team because I am her apprentice and the third best medical ninja in Konoha.” If it was possible, Genma looked even more agog at her declaration of being the third ranked medic in the village.

Itachi prevented another comment from Genma by explaining in detail what he expected of her. Since they were infiltrating a cult that killed people as offerings, he didn’t want her anywhere near anyone they suspected of belonging to the Hand of God. All of them were to keep their eyes peeled for the symbol of Jashin, an upside down triangle inscribed in a circle, which all members displayed in some manner. Sakura’s job, for the most part, consisted of talking to the townspeople and gathering what information she could without arousing suspicion. Until Itachi, Shisui and Genma successfully joined the rank of Jashin worshipping murderers, none of them would be staying in town. And regardless of the males’ progress in the ranks, Sakura was expected to maintain their camp five miles outside of the town and to conserve her chakra.

The rosette couldn’t decide if she was relieved that she didn’t have to go anywhere near the psychotic religious cult, or disappointed she only had a small part in it.
It took almost the rest of the day to reach the outskirts of the small town. The four of them observed the coming and goings of people through the town, which was nonexistent. After an hour of no one entering or exiting the town they searched for a clearing that they would set up camp in. Camp was assembled quickly and quietly. Night shifts were appointed, Sakura started to protest that even though she was only a chuunin she could handle a few hours on guard duty, when Itachi informed her she would be going into town tomorrow to start her information gathering.

So, although she was disgruntled about being single out, Sakura slept through the night and made her way into town early the next morning. Without the knowledge that there was a cult of Jashinists hidden in the town, the place looked quaint and relaxing and just oozed comforting. But, knowing what lay underneath the town’s charming appearance, Sakura felt sick to her stomach. It took every bit of will power she possessed to not jump at every movement of the people and the shadows.

She traversed the early morning vendors stalls, taking careful care as she questioned them about their town, making it sound like she wanted to be able to stay longer on her way back through (she was currently traveling with escort to her possible fiancée’s residence).

Sakura supposed that Itachi had deviated from the original game plan of “keep Sakura uninvolved” because the jittery people living in this town would be more likely to tell more to the innocent young girl with bright, unforgettable pink hair and expressive green eyes and a countenance that radiated naïve, if it was only to warn her of the dangers of the town and tell her it was in her best interests to leave as soon as possible. The sooner the better.

Most of the information was the same. Warnings to be careful who she talked to, wary of the strange disappearances that were occurring lately, advice to not travel along, it simply wasn’t safe for a beautiful young girl like herself. However, she did get two interesting tidbits.

The first was that the cult terrorized the owner of the local club and turned the place into their base. They did all their planning there before heading out onto the streets in search of that night’s sacrifice.

The second piece, and the more important of the two in her opinion, was when she learned that the leader of the Jashinists visited every three months to check in on his disciples progress.

She relayed this all back to the others over their wireless earpieces on her way back to camp, along with the knowledge that his last visit was this past week.

While that news seemed bad to Sakura, they had just missed the guy and would now have to wait three months before they could get anything on him, Itachi was pleased with it. Once he explained that it meant he, Genma, and Shisui would have almost three months to join the cult and fit in it made sense. This leader clearly expected his following to grow, so when he returned in three months, Itachi, Genma, and Shisui would only be three faces among any recruits, and nothing special or worth noting to their leader.

Still, three months seemed a long time to wait. And Sakura was aware of the possibility of it taking longer, because what were the chances of three newbies who just joined the cult being allowed to meet with their revered leader. And revered he was. From what the citizens had said, the leader was the most passionate of all the members of the Hand of God. Sakura deemed that to mean he was the craziest and knew she wanted nothing to do with him. It made her glad she wasn’t joining the men on entering the cult’s ranks.

They wouldn’t be taking any action now. Itachi was giving her two more days to gather what information she could before make a deal of leaving the town. She would then return here and
they would plan their move before the guys moved in a couple days after she “moved on to her fiancée’s house.”

Sakura made sure to remain as unnoticed as she could as the traveling wife to be with pink hair could, and also made sure not to ask too many questions that would make it seem like she was interested in the resident cult. She was not out to write her death warrant, and attracting too much attention to herself with all her question would certainly throw a flag, or more appropriately a kunai, in the Jashinists’ faces.

Her best efforts to remain detached and in a rush to get her supplies and get to her fiancée’s side did not keep her out of trouble.

It had been totally on accident, but she hand knocked over a young man as she ducked out under the covering of a jewelry stall and onto the packed mid-day street. Sakura had apologized profusely and picked his book up and handed to him. She nearly had a heart attack when she recognized the symbol of Jashin on it.

As the man brushed dirt of his clothes, which were expensively tailored, Sakura committed his eyes, hair color and style, prominent facial features, and the general build of his body to memory as she debating maintaining the charade by offering to buy him a drink, or apologizing a few more times before slinking into the crowd and leaving town a little early.

She figured the best decision was to offer to buy him a drink for knocking him over was the best choice. Maybe he would reveal some things that only a member would be privy to. So Sakura put on a rueful façade and threw in some fake tears in order to guilt the man into accepting her offer.

“You can choose the place. This is my last day here. I’m leaving for the Land of Tea in the morning and I haven’t had time to find the best places around here.” She faked a happy go lucky smile and let him wrap one tone arm around her shoulders as he guided her down the street and into a bar that said it was closed.

When she pointed that little detail out the man had given her shoulders a slight squeeze and said he knew the guy who owned the place and hung out here all the time. Sakura took that to mean that this dingy bar with a broken sign that said it was The Broken Tree was the bar where the Jashinists convened.

And as she was lead inside and directed, aka forced, to take a seat in a booth in the far corner with the guy with his arm still resting on her shoulders and a couple of his pals, for the first time in her life she hated being right. This had to be the stupidest and most dangerous situation she had ever gotten herself stuck in, even if it was unintentionally, and it had to be worse than any of the stupid things Naruto did without thinking.

“Who’s the chick, Shouta?” a balding greasy looking man that Sakura found it almost impossible to be someone her well dressed kidnapper associating with asked.

“No one, just some broad who bumped me on the streets an offered to buy me a drink.” The other three men at the table laughed uproariously. Sakura prayed to the gods, but not Jashin, that they were laughing because they were so feared they didn’t need anyone offering to buy them drinks, and not because buying a drink was synonymous with a champagne flute of blood during their next sacrifice.

Anxiety fluttered in her stomach as Shouta’s three pals regaled stories how they charmed wealthy travelers into donating to help fix up their bar. These travelers were so wealthy that they paid quite the handsome sum, but always left before they could be talked into donating more or coming back on their next time through. Sakura didn’t have to be Shikamaru to realize that these wealthy
patrons were they victims of their murderous religion and that they stole all that person’s money, although it clearly did not go to renovating their favorite bar judging by the peeling paint, stained tables and bar top, and fairly dirty drinking glasses.

An uneasy feeling crawled down her back. This cult was killing for money, but she had no idea what they were doing with the money. And her cover story as to why she was in town was that of young, wealthy daughter of a lord off to visit her fiancé, just the type of prey these guys were looking for and she had walked right into them. Literally. She downed the couple glasses of sake in front of her, mentally shouting her thanks to her shishou for teaching her how to handle her alcohol on the sly. She made the excuse of needing to use the restroom after six shots, and Shouta released her from his person for the first time since she had bumped into him and pointed her in the direction of the bathrooms.

She locked herself in the furthest stall from the door and turned on her earpiece to the angry hissing of her captain. “Where the in hell are you, Haruno? You were supposed to return two hours ago.”

“I kind of have an issue, taichou.”

“What kind of issue?”

“I accidentally knocked a member of the Hand of God on his ass and he brought me into their bar. I don’t think I’m coming back out.” It surprised Sakura how calm her own voice sounded as she relayed her inevitable death. She felt she should be panicking, she was only thirteen, but she couldn’t find it in her to do so. It would do her no good to panic or cry or whine about the unfairness of life. She had to focus on the mission and spill as much as she could to her team before she became the Jashin worshippers’ nightly offering to their god.

She was surprised by her captain’s violently swearing. She could even hear Genma’s and Shisui’s worried voices over the racket Itachi was making attempting to ask him just what had caused him to curse.

“We’ll get you out of there. Or attack before then can sacrifice you. You will not die on this mission, understand me, Sakura?” It wasn’t as much of a question as it was on order from her superior, but said girl disregarded it in favor of telling them that they were targeting wealthy travelers.

She turned off her transmission mid-order for her be careful and not provoke them any further, scurrying out of the stall and back into Shouta’s arm before he could get suspicious of her lengthy stay in the bathroom. Sakura caught the tail end of greasy’s suggestion that they save her for their leader. Part of her wanted to sag with relief. If they decided to wait to sacrifice her until their leader could do it personally, they would still have three months to infiltrate and maybe her team could rescue her. The other half of her was terrified. If she wasn’t saved she was going to be handed over to be sacrificed at the hands of their leader who found pure pleasure in sacrificing humans to Jashin.

Sakura leaned into Shouta, sending him an innocent look and trying to convey that she would absolutely love to meet their leader. She didn’t know if her actions had any part in his decision, but Shouta had announced that they would wait for Hidan-sama to return.

Sakura thought Hidan sounded familiar as Shouta lead her to a inn the Hand of God also controlled and set her up in one of its nicest suites. She listened as her kidnapper’s footsteps faded before she turned on her transmitter again. The first thing she heard was a ten minute long rant about the importance of obeying the captain’s orders and how she was never to turn off her earpiece until he dismissed her and that she would keep it on for the rest of the day so they would
know where to find her that night.

The rosette patiently waited for Itachi to hold in the lecture he had probably prepared the second she disconnected before telling all three of them that the decision had been made to save her for Hidan-sama personally.

“Are you positive they said Hidan?” Itachi asked anxiously.

“Yes.” She drew her answer out, uncertain why his name was so important. Her captain’s curses were almost as bad as Tsunade-sama’s when sober.

“Hidan is one of the supposedly immortal members of the Akatsuki. Whatever he is using the money he collects for can’t be good. We’ll need to send an emergency message to Hokage-sama and we need to get you out of there.”

Sakura vehemently protested the new plan. She pointed out they still had almost three months before Hidan returned so there was no rush to perform a jail break and jeopardize their mission. She agreed that the message to Tsunade-sama needed to be sent and that they should wait for a reply. She believed as long as it was possible for them to continue their mission they should do so.

Itachi’s sense of logic finally returned and he agreed to wait for the Hokage’s return message before making any final decisions. He warned her to not let her guard down and to find out what she could, like where they conducted their ritual sacrifices or where the stolen money was going, but not to be obvious about it and wind up bumping up her execution date.

She laid back on the bed in the room she had been given, admiring the luxury of it when their communication ended. She decided to take the posh living quarters as a sign they wanted their leader’s sacrifice to live comfortably and be in the best physical condition possible. She tried her best not to let her thoughts wander into the Realm or Morbidity and think about how this all could end if she wasn’t rescued or heaven forbid her shishou ordered the rest of the team to abandon the mission and leave her behind. She would like to think that Tsunade would never issue such an order, but she knew that the Hokage had to make a call based on what benefited the village more; infiltrating and taken down a cult that would decimate small towns, or sacrificing her apprentice so that Konoha’s presence would not be noticed by the Akatsuki.

Thoughts about her impending death slipped through the cracks in her mind. She didn’t want to die. She knew it was a shinobi’s duty, and that’s what she was, not a kunoichi but a shinobi of Konohagakure, to die for their village if necessary. And looking at the two choices, even Sakura could admit that the right choice to make was to leave her to fend for herself and kept Konoha protected from the Akatsuki’s radar.

She resolutely pushed those self-depreciating thoughts to the back of her mind. She still had a few days before a reply message from the Hokage would be received to learn more valuable information that could convince Tsunade that the best choice was to continue with the mission. And if it came to the worst possible outcome, she would still have three months before her executioner showed up.

Sakura made it through the next five days by pretending that this was part of the mission. She did as Shouta commanded and never left the room or opened the door to anyone but him. He had visited twice in the last five days. She feigned interest in the symbol on his jacket. She already knew what it stood for but let him prattle on about the Hand of God and their mission to bring in large amounts of money. Beyond a quick comment that all the money was given to their leader via secure drop points, he never mentioned what the money was for.

But it was enough for Sakura to know that the entirety of it went to Hidan.
On the sixth day since her fancy imprisonment in the Hand of God’s inn, Itachi reported to her the Hokage’s decision.

“The mission will continue. Do you have anything to report?”

Sakura took a deep breath to calm her excited nerves. Hearing that the mission would continue, that Tsunade-shishou wasn’t going to abort the mission and leave her made her feel as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulder.

She informed her captain that every penny of the money they stole from the victims they killed went directly to Hidan, and most likely from there to the Akatsuki treasury. She told they used a drop-off/pick-up method, but the drop points were unknown.

Once the exchange of information was concluded, the pink haired chuunin leapt to her feet and started bouncing on the bed. She was being faced with the toughest mission in her ninja career thus far, and probably of her entire career to come, she refused to think she would not be saved now that had three months to plan a rescue mission, and she was holding under the adversity.

Although after another ten weeks spent on tenterhooks, the strain of being discovered, the pressure that she most definitely could die any time in the upcoming weeks and it was a guarantee at the end of them, she might need a full psyche evaluation and some major relaxation time and maybe even a return to D-rank missions were her objective would be stress free.

Now that she knew she had to learn as much as possible about this criminal organization, Sakura began plotting the best way to make Shouta reveal the inner goings of the Hand of God without him cottoning on to the fact that she was bleeding him dry of everything he knows. Then she had to consider would he even tell a girl that was going to be a sacrifice what they were doing, or could she wriggle it out of him because they both knew she was dying, even if she was no longer certain of that possibility.

Would a listening ear be the best choice or should she try to seduce him with what little she had learned in the female only classes at the academy? They didn’t cover much of anything in those classes, but she thought she knew the basics.

Sakura rejected the seduction plan. It would be weird and a little obvious if she started randomly hitting on him when she had not done so when they first meet. Plus he would see through her straight away because she had no experience. Her final reason was because even thinking about it made her feel like she was cheating on Neji. But she would never mention that to anyone. Personal feelings were not supposed to be involved in a mission.

-CHUUNIN-

Most of the days passed in an agonizing blur of monotony, mostly interrupted by Shouta’s visits, but even those visits were expected and not as much of a break in routine that she longed for.

Five weeks into her stay at this in, she still didn’t know the name, Shouta came and told her he would be gone for the next two weeks and that someone else would stop by and entertain her in the evenings. Sakura desperately hoped that he was not replaced by the guy she had named “Greasy.”

The pinkette dutifully passed on her new visitor’s arrangement at her scheduled four in the morning review of the day to her captain. Three weeks ago Itachi had set designated times for her to make her daily reports. Sakura’s best guess was that it was designed so she wouldn’t be surprised by one of her kidnapper’s anticipated surprise visits to her room.
She wasn’t at all surprised by the knock on her door the next evening.

What did surprise her was the person standing on the threshold. If she hadn’t already known there wasn’t another person dead or alive that could give off the aura that Itachi did, Sakura would have thought she was dreaming. But as it was, a very real Itachi standing on her doorstep giving off those vibes that she sensed whenever she came within five feet of the guy, she determined that he had to be the real deal and silently stepped back to allow him entrance to her cell.

“What are you doing here? When did you join the cult? And why didn’t you tell me? Are Shisui and Genma here too?” Sakura fired off question after question.

“I am here because I am the one assigned to check in on you daily. I have been in for nearly four weeks, Shisui one, and Genma will join in another two. As to why you were not informed, we didn’t want you to give any indication that you had allies nearby.”

Sakura was not happy with the last answer. She had managed the whole time she was being held hostage, which total five weeks, never hinted that she had backup camping five miles outside the town. What difference did it make knowing that they were now inside the organization itself instead of making plans in a clearing in the forest? Either way, Sakura still knew that her three teammates were out there, so why did Itachi think she would end up giving up the game by knowing that their mission had progressed?

“What’s changed since yesterday?”

“Aside from Shouta going MIA for the next two weeks, nothing. While it’s nice not to have to risk being caught giving reports over our transmitters, there will be nothing to report until he comes back. He was my only visitor until now and my source of information. The three of you will probably learn more than I will.”

Itachi agreed with her conclusion and, after some wheedling and straight up begging complete with waterworks, promised to keep her updated on anything they learned or any change in plans each night he came to check in on her.

Sakura couldn’t put into words how much she appreciated Itachi’s visits that came at the same time every day. It gave her the chance to pretend that she wasn’t essentially being held captive, even if she had a long chain, and being prepared as the sacrificial lamb for the slaughter.

She could pretend her life wasn’t at serious risk and that she wouldn’t fall to fulfill her promise to Hanabi to return and teach her whatever topic it was that caught her fancy that day.

She could peer through rose colored glasses and see a simple information retrieval mission. She could pretend the room she was figuratively locked in belonged to either the Hyuuga or Uchiha compound back in Konoha and that she was safe at home.

She tried not to dwell on the possibility of a whole ANBU squad being wiped out because she pressed for continuing the mission despite the dire situation. Now she was having second thoughts and she would have forgiven her shishou had the women chosen to abandon her and the mission although she had learned from Kakashi-sensei that it was better to abandon the mission and the rules in order to save a friend.

But guilt weighed heavily on her heart. If anyone died on this mission, and she could envision no scenario in which all four members of the team walked away, it would be her fault for insisting they continue with the mission as planned. It would be her fault if she was unable to heal her teammates, if they fell while attempting to rescue her because she was too busy playing the damsel in distress.
She was a shinobi of Konoha. The Will of Fire burned in her veins. Even though she was a kunoichi, she wasn’t supposed to be the damsel in distress in desperate need of a hero to swoop in, rescuing her, defeating the bad guys, and saving the day. She was supposed to be a part of that saving the day part.

It was her one objective on this mission. The reason Tsunade-sama had given her the position despite her poorly hidden unease. Don’t get involved. Stay far back and do not engage. Conserve your chakra so you can heal your fallen comrades.

Well, sheer boredom had its benefits. With hours of uninterrupted blocks of time, Sakura was able to meditate really for all hours of the day, allowing her to store massive amounts of chakra in the Yin Seal on her navel. And the only thing that would change in the six weeks to come until Hidan came to kill her would be the volume of chakra in the seal. At the rate it was building, she would have enough to activate the Creation Rebirth Jutsu five times.

Sakura was feeling something stronger than disappointed when she opened her prison door to reveal Shouta for the first time in two weeks. In the remaining four weeks that she was unconsciously counting down day by day until the bringer of her end arrived, she knew she would only become more tense and frightened as she chalked off another day. And if this was going to be her last month, she most definitely did not want to spend any of it with the guy that pushed over the first domino by actually accepting her offer to buy him a drink. Honestly, nobody did that anymore. Everyone was always in such a hurry to get somewhere that your apology would go in one ear and out the other and your attempt to be polite and make amends wouldn’t even register.

So it was safe to say she didn’t want to see the man who had signed her death warrant two months ago and thought it amusing to torture her with the knowledge that her last day was rapidly approaching. Sakura was completely put off when he presented her a calendar with a flourish and a mock bow. The calendar as already marked. A giant red circle on what she assumed to be today’s date, the twenty-first of February. She made a mental note to cook a fantastic dinner for Neji if she got back for missing their first Valentine’s Day together. Exactly four weeks from now, on March twenty-first was the symbol of Jashin complete with a crude sketch of a skull.

Shouta didn’t stay to talk that night, not that Sakura wanted to. At this point, she didn’t think there was much else she could get out of the guy. Now the man’s visits were turning into a chore she hating doing but her mother forced her to do anyway.

And so, with the red marker, which she was sure he had chosen so she could be tortured with images of her own blood being spilled during what painful ritual was to come, Sakura drew a giant as each day ended. She spent all of her time meditating on the window sill where she could see the sunrises and sunsets each day. She meditated, and calmed her mind and focused solely on concentrating her chakra into her Yin Seal so that she didn’t have time to think on her personal encroaching apocalypse date.

A row of red exes marked the calendar before her jailer returned. This time he didn’t come to torment the poor girl that wouldn’t see her fourteenth birthday, not that he knew how old she was but that wasn’t the point. He stormed into her room and started ranting about how some subordinate or other that was in charge of handling this month’s drop off had left the money in the wrong hollowed tree along the river to the town’s south and how he didn’t have the time to send him out with someone that knew the location of the correct drop off before Hidan-sama found an empty pick up site.

After a half hour of non-stop ranting about the incompetence of the idiots involved in this robbery scam, the pink haired girl realized that Shouta had forgotten that she was in the room. He still completely failed to realize she had been present the whole time as he stomped out of the room.
That night Sakura gladly revealed the lower rank member’s screw up and was rewarded with a report two hours later that the bounty was found and taken to their base to be split amongst them as a bonus when this mission was over. Sakura thought it wasn’t the best compensation for her terrible ordeal, but it felt amazing to get one over on an Akatsuki member and walk away with his stolen money. She greatly appreciated Itachi claiming that it was to be dividing between all four members of the team when they completed the mission. His confidence gave her hope that they might all survive the upcoming challenge.

Sakura found meditation harder to accomplish as she marked off another week in red exes. There were only fourteen days on the calendar. Two weeks until she was scheduled to be sacrificed to Jashin. One fortnight to review plans hatched in the early hours of the morning when she wanted nothing more than to be preparing herself for what may be to come.

Three quarters of the days on the calendar were covered with bright red exes. Her dreams when she slept was full of the Jashinist worshipper’s symbol, gian ted red exes, and calendars where every day was the twenty-first of March and she was killed over and over again with the rise of the sun on the next twenty-first of March.

Her hands trembled as she crossed off the days of her last week. As she drew an ex over the date Wednesday, March 19, Sakura felt disgust well up inside her. Her she was, two days from the day she would die, and she was still playing along with that damn cult junkie’s game and obediently counting the days until she would die. She hurled the marker at the wall for all the damage it would do. Without her enhanced strength it wasn’t anything more than a scuff on the wall, but she couldn’t reveal that she was a ninja, she had been expertly masking her chakra since the start of the mission, but it sure did make her feel better about her situation.

Sakura did not sleep of the twentieth of March. Even after the tantrum she threw yesterday she had picked up the marker and drawn another red ex on the calendar. It infuriated her that there was nothing she could do. She was already as good as dead.

Her sleepless night continued into the twenty-first. She sat still as a statue on the window sill, her eyes never breaking their gaze on her cell’s door. She sat for hours, wondering if they purposefully were holding the ritual late at night so should would have that final day to suffer and feel the despair and misery that she would die that night and she would be unable to prevent it.

But the door never opened. The floorboards in the hallway didn’t groan under the heavy footfalls of an untrained grown man and alert her to someone’s approach. The sun sank below the horizon the moon climbed into the black sky. She watched the moon’s progress across the vast expanse that was space. Just looking at the sky and the thousands and millions of stars twinkling made her realize that her existence was just a small piece, and that those that would mourn her death would eventually move on like she did after the death of her parents.

Strangely, the thought that the people she was leaving behind to grieve for her eventually finding comfort and peace with her moving on, resulted in the loss of all the tension in her body. Sakura no longer felt frightened at the possibility of her death. A sense of sereneness washed over her and she was able to meditate again.

Now that the twenty-first had come and gone with no Hidan and her acceptance of death, Sakura had no problem crossing off the days as they went by. She enjoyed each extra day she had to live but didn’t let her hopes of escape get out of control.

Hidan finally arrived on Thursday, March 27, a full week after his initial expected date.
Sakura heard him before she saw him. He was yelling louding at the buffoons that had received the blessing of Jashin but didn’t deserve because they offered pitiful sacrifices and mercy kills.

“And you, Shouta! Where is my fucking money? I give you the fucking approval of Jashin to make your fucking worthless sacrifices, and you fail to fucking deliver my fucking money! If it’s not fucking found by the end of the fucking ceremony tomorrow, you’ll be the next fucking sacrifice to Jashin!”

Seconds later her door was thrown open and the doorway was filled with a tall stranger. Hidan had medium length silver hair slicked back with distinctive purple eyes. He wore his Akatsuki cloak open with no shirt, only pants under it revealing his Yugakure forehead protector around his neck and Jashin amulet. He also wore dark green nail polish and an orange ring on his left index finger. A triple blade scythe was prominent behind him. What parts of his body were visible she could she shoddy stitching job.

“Yes, fucking Shouta was right. You’ll make a fucking excellent lay. And then a fucking better sacrifice to Jashin. He loves the taste of a fucking newly popped cherry virgin’s blood.” Hidan licked his lips and was gone. For the first time since she had been brought to this room, the door was locked and she was trapped.

Sakura broke the rules regarding times when she could contact Itachi and turned on her transmitter. “He’s going to rape me first.” She blurted out as soon as she heard the beep indicating they were connected.

For the first time since the mission started, her captain did not scold her for breaking the rules.

The pinkette glanced at the calendar that had fallen of the wall when Hidan had made his dramatic entrance. Tomorrow would be March twenty-eight. Her fourteenth birthday. She survived long enough to see it, and her birthday presents were rape and death.

She didn’t know if she would be laughing because she had actually made it to her birthday, or crying because she was going to die on her fourteenth birthday.

-CHUUNIN-

Sakura’s body decided for her.

She was woken when the sun rose and dragged out of her room by the other two goons that had been present that day at the bar. She had been stripped of the clothes she had been wearing for the last three months and tossed ungracefully into an ice cold bath.

Despite the fact that the water was cold enough to be crystalizing, Sakura relished the first opportunity she had in three months to truly wash the lingering body odor and be clean. Her bath didn’t last as long as she would like for she was pulled out by two females that she had never met, (she hadn’t even been aware there were any female member, she was under the impression it was a males only club), and they dressed her in a stark white stiff dress.

It was when she was chained to a cross on a stage that she cried as she came to realize that not only was she going to be raped and murdered, but the whole Hand of God organization was going to witness her humiliation. Humiliation and horror that was compounded when she remembered that somewhere in the audience stood, Itachi, Shisui, and Genma.

She cried silent tears as her torture and fate was prolonged and she was forced to watch as Hidan cut down sacrifice after sacrifice with his scythe. She was tonight’s main entertainment and therefore would go last.
Hidan approached her at last. A dangerous smirk on his face, tongue slipping out to taste blood splattered on his scythe. Lust shone in his eyes. It made Sakura feel dirty just to have him look at her like that. She liked it better when Neji looked at her with pride, or amazement, or care in his eyes. She hated the way the Akatsuki member eyed her like a piece of meat.

The scythe rose. Sakura followed its ascent.

She closed her eyes, unable to stare her killer in the face as he sacrificed her to Jashin and not wanting to look through the audience’s faces, searching for the familiar one’s of her team only to see the hopelessness of the situation that she felt reflected in each of their eyes.

Whispers of anticipation reached her ears. The crowd of Jashinists wanted their sacrifice. They wanted Hidan to stop delaying and finish her.

A screamed echoed. For a second Sakura thought it was her own, but she didn’t feel any pain.

She opened her eyes even though she thought it was a bad idea.

Three black blurs were speeding through throng of sin worshippers, Genma and Shisui on either side of Itachi as they forced their way to the stage. Blood rained below her.

Hidan stopped his downswing mid-attack, turning to face the three shinobi causing havoc during his sacrifice. Sakura jumped on his momentary distraction to channel chakra to her forearms and wrists and break free of the restraints holding her to the sacrificial cross. She barely managed to duck under his scythe’s three blades and was hit in the face with the long metal cable the connected the bottom of the scythe’s handle to under his cloak.

The Akatsuki member ignored her and flipped off the altar.

“Itachi! Watch out! His scythe isn’t meant to cause damage. It draws blood that he uses in some creepy jutsu to inflict pain on his enemy whose blood it’s coated in.”

Hidan aimed his giant triple bladed scythe at Itachi. The two engaged in battle. It was very one sided. Her captain spent more time dodging the fast moving weapon than making attacks of his one, not that his attacks did anything more than irritate his opponent. Not a single one caused any damage.

While Itachi fought what looked like it would become a losing battle, Shisui and Genam were thinning the crowd. Sakura was about to leap into the fray and help clear out the excess bodies still willing to cause destruction on Jashin’s name, Hidan gained the upper hand in his battle, nicking Itachi across his left bicep.

The change in Hidan’s behavior and appearance was instantaneous. He laughed maniacally declaring that he had been waiting for this moment as he drew Jashin’s symbol on the ground in what appeared to be blood, but there was too much present for it to all be Itachi’s.

‘Unless,’ she thought, eyes widening in horror as Hidan’s skin turned blacked and bones appeared to be drawn on top, contrasting against the black skin that made her shudder and displaying his skeleton on the outside of his body, ‘he only needs a single drop of blood for his jutsu!’

The freak show in front of her raised his large triple blade scythe once more.

He totally took her and her teammates by surprised when he turned it on himself and dragged it across his abdomen. Sakura tried to recall what little she knew about this Akatsuki member as Itachi cried out in pain and Hidan laughed. She knew he had achieved a sense of immortality through his rituals to Jashin, rituals that involved a scythe designed to draw blood and not rip
limbs from bodies. His change in appearance and the Jashin symbol drawn on the ground he was standing in had to factor in somehow.

After a few more agonized self-mutilations that caused Itachi to collapse on the ground and Hidan to giggle like a little girl, Sakura understood that Hidan’s bizarre transformed state dealt any damage him inflicted on himself to the person who was linked to him by the blood used to draw the symbol for the jutsu. So the only way to save Itachi would to break the zombie’s technique, which was easier said then done.

Any time she or her two teammate made an attempt to break his jutsu, Hidan stepped out of his circle, whirled his scythe at them, forced them to retreat, and stepped back into his cursed circle to deal more pain to Itachi, who was going to die soon if they did not end this freak’s jutsu so she could heal him.

It was during one of these attempts when Sakura realized that any damage he took while outside his circle was not transferred to her captain when Shisui just caught him with a kunai to the shoulder with his Body Flicker Technique.

“That’s it! We have to force him out of the circle and defeat him before he can reenter! Or destroy it while he’s not inside it.’ They would still have to deal with how exactly to dispatch him, but their major problem would be solved if they could rescue Itachi. Then she could heal him and Genma and Shisui would be able to focus on taking out Hidan.

Sakura had no time to warn her teammates if she wanted to succeed in catching the Jashin follower off guard. She leapt into the air with the aid of some chakra and the bottom of her feet, and came back down head first and fist extended.

The ground beneath them shattered, exploding out in a circle around her. Her attack forced Hidan to jump into the air so as not to lose his footing, which accomplished her goal of forcing him out of that damned cursed circle, and had the added benefit of cracking the circle. The blood lost its form and ran.

Hidan was spitting mad as his zombie persona disappeared and was replaced with his normal looks.

Sakura rushed in and heaved Itachi on one shoulder and leapt backwards when Hidan made to attack her. Shisui and Genma had intercepted the attack intended her for and held him off while she hauled her captain a safe distance from the battle. She didn’t have time to deal with all of his wounds, so she quickly closed the three that were bleeding the most to prevent him from bleeding out. She would come back and finish her rushed and shoddy treatment once the threat to his life was eliminated.

However, taking out Hidan was easier thought than done. With a guy that was immortal in every way and could not die from normal critical injuries, how were they supposed to win? She knew logical that there had to be some weak point in his method of immortality. She had come across many experiments in her medical studies regarding ways of obtaining immortality, but each experiment was flawed in some manner. There was always something wrong that prevented the user from gaining true immortality. She just had to think.

Think. That was it. If they cut off his head, surely Hidan would die. He may be unable to die from physical attacks, but there was no jutsu in the world that could keep you alive if the brain was removed from the rest of the body. Decapitation had to be his one weakness.

The only problem with that was getting close enough to remove his head from his shoulders before he could get a sample of your blood and trap you in his demonic circle. Reaching Hidan
would be extremely hard. He was skilled with taijutsu and the scythe. He wielded that weapon like he had been born with it in his hand, with tremendous aim and control. The large size somewhat slowed his attacks, but they were still fast enough that he nearly caught both Shisui and Genma on multiple occasions, and he was surprising agile, possessing amazing acrobatic prowess and dexterity.

Sakura left her position at Itachi’s side where she had been calculating the various battle plans she had developed and their most likely outcomes.

She mentally reviewed the four clauses that made the Medic’s Code.

Clause one: No medic ninja shall ever stop medical treatment until the lives of their party members have come to an end. She was definitely breaking that one. Itachi was behind her only temporarily healed so he would last until the three of them had taken out Hidan, which was a tall order.

Clause two: No medic ninja shall ever stand on the front lines. Sakura supposed any repeated offenses were forgiven because Itachi had order her to question the townspeople, so it was his fault she ended up captured and fighting this battle. She distinctly ignored the voice telling her it was he fault for involving herself with an unknown variable when she had been order to keep her engagement to a minimum and go unnoticed.

Clause three: No medic ninja shall ever die until they are the last of their platoon. She wasn’t dead yet, and despite being ready for it only minutes ago, she was not ready to die now. She had three teammates to take care of and see that they returned safely to the village. Although, the way the battle was going, being the only person on the team drilled in avoiding attacks and always dodging, she may be the only one that stood a chance against Hidan’s giant scythe. It was an idea that scared the hell out of her. She did not want to put the hopes of her team success and victory in this battle on her ability to dodge his attacks one hundred percent of the time. She had only had eight months training with Tsunade-shishou, and she had just spent three months in an inn room where her skills had to atrophy from lack of use.

Clause four: Only those medic ninja who have mastered the Strength of a Hundred Technique of the ninja art Creation Rebirth are permitted to discard the above-mentioned laws. She had mastered Tsunade’s legendary Creation Rebirth jutsu, but they had not touched upon the Strength of a Hundred Technique.

So by entering into this battle, Sakura was simultaneously breaking all four clauses of the Medic’s Code she had sworn to uphold and honor when she began her training as a medic under the Head Medic at the hospital.

But she had no choice. She only hoped that when Tsunade-sama read her report where she blatantly hanged the Code that she wouldn’t force Sakura to do more endurance and avoidance drills.

For someone who had never worked with either of the ANBU at her side, Sakura slid seamlessly into their attack pattern and found herself able to read the twitches in their bodies and Hidan’s to predict their attacks and either coordinate an attack or counter. She supposed this ability she had never noticed was some combination of her knowledge of the body from her anatomy and physiology studies and her gained awareness on everything around her from her genjutsu detection training.

Shisui was a never stopping black blur as he tried to use his Body Flicker Technique to attack somewhere he believed Hidan to be defenseless. Either he was thwarted by Hidan blocking with his scythe, or the psycho let the attack hit. The speed of the Uchiha’s attacks didn’t faze him.
Genma was equally useless. He had apparently come to the conclusion that she had already reached, that Hidan must have some sort of chink in his immortal armor, but unlike her he did not appear to have figured out the weakest part of his armor and was reduced to defending himself from Hidan’s attempt to get his hands on some of his blood and use his creepy pain transferring jutsu again.

Sakura danced in and out of reach. She never once came close to getting hit with the three bladed scythe and was quite good at landing chakra enhanced punches that served to distract him from the fact that she was slowly inching her attacks further up his body and towards his neck with each punch as she skillfully stay well out of his cursed weapon’s reach.

Hidan twisted his torso left to throw up an arm to defend himself against another of Shisui’s attacks, leaving his back wide open to her. She waited until Genma’s sword locked against his scythe before she drove forward and wrestled his scythe from him with her inhuman strength. Almost as if they had been reading her mind, Genma and Shisui leapt away from the pink haired chuunin that had stolen the big bad immortal Akatsuki’s religious weapon and swung it at him with all her might.

Sakura felt quite the accomplishment for herself when the threw blades passed through the Jashinist’s neck as if she was cutting butter and his head rolled across the broken ground. Now, killing the Akatsuki member responsible for her hellish three month ordeal plus the stolen money went a long way towards making this mission likable.

She gripped the scythe with two hands and brought it down on her knee with the intention of snapping it in two like a toothpick.

The only thing she snapped was her femur.

“Just what the fuck do you think you’re fucking doing you fucking bitch!”

Sakura startled so badly the scythe flew from her hands and land three blades deep into Hidan’s motionless chest. The body once again took on the skeletal design, but neither body nor talking head moved, even though severed head’s mouth was moving and cursing.

If Sakura didn’t know she had a patient waiting to be healed, she would have allowed herself to faint from shock. She had been so sure that the key to defeating Hidan’s version of immortality was to kill him in the one manner that guaranteed death. But apparently the laws of nature didn’t apply to Hidan, because he was clearly still alive and cursing up a storm.

The rosette repaired her broken femur and wrenched the scythe from his unmoving chest. Apparently she had discovered the reasoning behind the patchy stitch work she had seen. He could apparently be taken apart without dying. Maybe Hidan had stumbled upon the true version of immortality, even if it was the most horrific and gruesome method she had witnessed.

His weird curse seemed to work on him too. As she removed the scythe from his chest, the Jashin symbol was immediately drawn on the ground in his blood. As much as she would have loved to return the favor and make him suffer the same pain her captain had, she had to heal Itachi. It seemed that as long as his head was detached from his body that Hidan was incapacitated and as harmless as a newborn kitten.

So Sakura ignored the stream of vulgarity that left his mouth and returned to Itachi’s side.

“Nimosu Sōzō Saisei!”

Two awestruck faces looked at her as Itachi’s body began to heal on its own. The Yin Seal on her
navel had been released, but instead of unconsciously handing over her control over her chakra to
her chakra, Sakura maintained her connections and directed the chakra flow up her abdomen and
down her arms that lay on top of Itachi’s bare chest. One of the other two had already torn open
his shirt.

Sakura watched fascinated as tendrils of her chakra took the form of vines and crept along her skin
and down her arms until they connected with Itachi. One the chakra vines had latched onto Itachi,
Sakura let go of her conscious control over her chakra and let it do what the jutsu was designed to
do.

“Sakura? Just what the hell are you doing? I’ve never heard of this kind of healing technique!”
Shisui looked to be a cross between in awe of her jutsu and fearful of what it was because he
didn’t recognize it.

“Don’t worry, Shisui. I modified Tsunade-shishou’s Creation Rebirth technique so I could reverse
its affects and turn the stored chakra into a patient’s body so that damaged cells would
automatically start regenerating. It follows the basic principles of Tsunade-shishou’s jutsu, except
that it doesn’t work on the caster but on the receiver of the chakra. Pretty cool, huh?” she grinned.

Both men completely agreed with her.

“Wait a minute. Did you say it has all the same effects of Tsunade-sama’s original technique?”

“And you created this yourself?”

Sakura glanced between the two men who had asked their questions at the same time. “Yes,
Genma, I created it, and yes, Shisui it has the same benefits and drawbacks.”

“Does that mean that Itachi’s lifespan will be shortened?”

“Yes,” the pink haired medic answered matter of factly. Itachi’s cousin looked like he wanted
nothing more than to choke her. “But it isn’t as much as you’re thinking. A couple months
minimum, maybe a year tops. It’s not like he is going to die next week because I used this jutsu on
him.”

Shisui looked much less inclined to shake her by the neck as if she was a rag doll with her
confirmation on the amount of lifespan the cousin he idolized lost.

“Itachi will be fine.” She whispered.

‘I on the other hand will be out with physical and chakra exhaustion for a few days.’

Sakura made the mental note, realizing that she made an awful lot of these and she should write
them down so she remembered them all, that she needed to stop passing out when healing
Uchihas. It wasn’t exactly the reputation she wanted.
Sakura was no longer surprised when she woke in an unfamiliar room. It had become such a commonplace occurrence in the last year that she no longer felt the need to start screaming and demanding to know where she was.

She turned on her side on the mattress; it was a really good one, and nearly bumped noses with Itachi Uchiha.

The tall, dark haired ANBU captain had been seated in a wooden chair at her bedside, and judging by the fact that he had actually slumped in his seat (a feat she was unaware he could do, she thought Uchihas were born with excellent posture) she guessed he had been there long enough to develop a major crick in his neck and lower back region. She also found it remarkable that the eldest Uchiha was capable of falling asleep on watch.

The rosette slipped out of her bed, her movements unnoticed (something else that had belonged on her list of impossibility because Itachi was as observant as a Nara), and ran a simple full body scan on her captain. Aside from his apparent exhaustion, her Reverse Creation Rebirth technique worked like a charm and any damage from his battle with the silver haired, Jashin worshipping, foul mouthed Akatsuki member was completely healed. He looked like he had never crossed paths with the scythe wielding psycho.

Hidan. What had become of him? She remembered his head still talking after she decapitated him but ignoring the man who broke every law of nature in favor of saving Itachi’s life. Had Shisui and Genma disposed of him? Was there any real way to dispose of this particular immortal? Or was their best solution to keep him in pieces?

Sakura flared her chakra in the hopes of finding one of her other two teammates so he could fill her in on whatever she had missed while she was out, well, however long it had been, but neither one answered her call.

A yawn made its presence known and the pink haired girl took that as a sign to cuddle in the warmth of her blankets and sleep until morning. Any questions she was dying to have answered could wait until everyone was present and more importantly well rested and refreshed.

That way she would only have to tell her part of the story once. And her part in this mission didn’t amount to much and she was well taken care of until Hidan had arrived and threatened to rape her. But she would like not to have to repeat herself and answer the same questions to half a dozen different people, so it would make it easier on all of them if they whole story was told at the same time.

Sakura took one final look at the long haired male that was sleeping perched in the chair beside her. There wasn’t much she could do for him right now, but she draped one of her many blankets over him. He had to be uncomfortable sleeping in a chair. The blanket wouldn’t make it any easier on his back, but at least he would be warm through the night.

-JOUNIN-

The next time Sakura woke up, not only was Itachi awake and the blanket she had given him suspiciously absent, but Genma and Shisui were there as well.

None of the three noticed that she was awake, or if they did they didn’t make any moves to ask her how she was, all of them involved in a quiet conversation that even less than five feet from
them she couldn’t hear, which lead her to the conclusion they were talking about her.

“Ah, Sakura-chan, you’re awake!” Shisui used his Body Flicker to glomp her in a tight bear hug.

While Sakura appreciated the enthusiasm, she could not understand why the more outgoing Uchiha was acting like they were best friends seeing each other for the first time in years.

“Glad to see you up, Sakura. You’ve been sleeping for quite a while.” She did not like the mischievous smile on Genma’s face. In the little bit of time she had spent with him, she had learned that smile meant he was going to tease her until she thought her face would be permanently red. And in previous interactions he had proven to be very good at it. The last time it had happened was when he came to fetch her for Tsunade-sama.

Normally that wasn’t a problem. He delivered his message and Sakura dropped everything to rush to her shishou’s side. However during that particular incident she had been training with Neji and the jutsu she had been practicing that would create a wall of water in front of her made it seem like Sakura had emptied a bottle of water on the ground and Neji followed through on his lunge and rammed into her, throwing them both to the ground. It was at that particular moment Genma had made his appearance while Neji had been straddling her and pinning down her arms and legs.

Genma had strolled on up to them, said “Didn’t know you were the type that like to be dominated, Sakura,” and she and Neji had put ten feet between so fast that it looked like they had learned to body flicker. Genma had delivered his message after a little bit more teasing; a full five minutes of it, and Sakura had all but run away from the training grounds with her face on fire. Every time since, the second she saw Genma she hurried to the Hokage’s office before he could say anything.

“You’ve been sleeping for over a week,” he continued. “I thought we might have to snatch Neji from his bed and bring him here so Prince Charming could be the knight in shining armor and be waking his princess with a kiss.

‘Over a week!’ She didn’t think that her jutsu would take that much out of her. Granted it was the first time she had used it on another human having reconstructed it by trying it on injured animals she found, but she never imagined it would have drained her to the point where she slept for a week. When she healed the animal she had only felt like she had just climbed out of a pool and gravity took hold.

She fought down a blush as she ignored the rest of what Genma said.

“A week, really?”

“Yup.” Shisui said brightly. “We cleaned up the Hand of God, temporarily sealed Hidan’s head and body in two separate scrolls. That bastard is unbelievably hard to kill. We’ve tried everything so far. Fired Katon jutsus at him, tried to drown him, the kunai to the heart only made him twitch, so we settled for incapacitating him. I wanted to bash his head in and see if anything happened, but captain over here said we have to bring him back alive.

“We’ve just been waiting for you to come back to reality so we could head back home.” Shisui ruffled her hair.

Shisui and Genma chattered on a while longer detailing all that she had missed while she had been catching up on her beauty sleep. The pinkette wondered if Itachi would speak up and got her answer when said man tilted his head and the other two males slipped out the door leaving just her and Itachi.

“I wanted to thank you.” He said quietly. “Shisui and Genma explained the jutsu you used.”
Sakura internally was having a panic attack. Itachi’s tone was just as monotonous as always, but she was sure he was angry at her for using an unknown and untested jutsu on him without permission. And he had every right to be. It their teammates had told him everything, then he knew that she had taken some time off his life. Would he tell Tsunade-shishou? Would her status as a ninja be revoked?

“You saved my life.”

Sakura’s heart skipped a beat. He wasn’t scolding her for using her Reverse Creation Rebirth jutsu. He had thanked her for saving his life. She was briefly reminded of the last time she had healed an Uchiha, only she remembered that that Uchiha didn’t grant her any thanks.

“Perhaps you will be able to join us on other missions in the future should the need arise.” The ever stoic and distant Uchiha ruffled her hair and gracefully left her alone to her thoughts.

Itachi’s words echoed in her head. A small giggle escaped and turned into a real laugh. This wasn’t the end of her ninja career. Her captain wasn’t going to report her for using a potentially unsafe jutsu. He had even subtly hinted that he would welcome her on a mission again. That meant Sakura had impressed him!

Sakura’s feelings of giddiness and euphoria last the return trip to Konoha. She had been part of an ANBU team, completed a dangerous mission, had a hand in taking down an Akatsuki member (she was most proud of this achievement because it meant one less person after Naruto), saw her own jutsu in action, and received praise from Itachi Uchiha himself (and he was really hard to impress if Sasuke’s goal and general grouchiness were anything to go by).

The team of four arrived in Konoha in the late hours of the night, so their initial oral report to the Hokage was short and to the point (“The situation was handled and the Hand of God disbanded.”) Tsunade ordered them out of her office after telling them to submit a written report within a week and a reminder that she would be calling them in for the full first hand report tomorrow afternoon.

-JOUNIN-

Tsunade sighed heavily as Shizune informed her that Fugaku was demanding she perform a check up on Itachi’s Sharingan. While she had been looking at it after every mission and was trying to fix the rapid deterioration that the overuse was causing, she wasn’t a miracle worker. The eyes were delicate and complicated and one mistake from her would leave one of her best ninjas permanently blind.

However, as Hokage, she did not appreciate being order to do something she was already going to do at three in the morning.

Tsunade gave her assistant every excuse she had, the late hour, the buildup of paper work (to which she replied that Tsunade went out of her way to avoid the paper work so it was her fault she had so much and she couldn’t use that as an excuse to not look at Itachi’s Sharingan), Hokage trumps medic, but Shizune accepted none of them.

So the blonde found herself determining just how further Itachi’s eyesight had deteriorated and evaluating how much time off to give him. She should have known it wouldn’t be that easy when she won the scratch off lottery three months ago. Tsunade had thought the bad event foretold by her win was her second apprentice’s capture (she almost sent the rest of the ANBU force to retrieve her but was stopped by Shizune).

This mission was giving her more trouble than she had anticipated when she was forced to add a chunin to the squad and she was against allowing Sakura to participate in such a dangerous
Tsunade asked Itachi to reactivate his Sharingan and then turn it off again so she could reexamine his chakra pathways and the condition of his eye cells and measure the inflammation of his nerves. The second test came up with the same results as the first.

She took a step back from the bed the Uchiha heir was sitting on, displeasure evident on her face. Tsunade hated mysteries. Especially when they involved miraculous medical recoveries that were not physically possible and made absolutely no sense. There was no reason for Itachi’s eyes to be as new as the day he was born. It just wasn’t possible for his eyes to be back at full working condition.

She tiredly rubbed her eyes, half wishing that the boy was half blind still so she wouldn’t have this massive migraine.

“What’s the matter with my son’s eyes?” Fugaku demanded.

“Nothing. There’s absolutely not a damn thing wrong with his eyes. And that’s the whole problem!”

“Why would that be a problem?” asked Mikoto. “Isn’t it a good thing if his eyes are healed?”

“Yes, it’s a good thing, but I didn’t heal his eyes and I don’t know who did it or how they did it. For all I know this could be temporary.”

Neither parent was happy with the Hokage’s answer.

“I believe this may have been Sakura Haruno’s doing.”

The rooms other three occupants snapped their heads, with audible cracks in the Hokage’s and Fugaku’s vertebrae, in Itachi’s direction.

“What did you say? No I don’t need you to repeat yourself. I heard you the first time.” Tsunade barked. “Did you just say my apprentice healed your eyes? God knows the girl is talented. That’s why I took her on, but she’s only been learning for a year. Sakura’s not capable of healing something as complex as a falling apart kekkei genkai. Maybe in a couple of years, but now?”

“I do not believe she did so intentionally. I don’t think she knows she healed them.”

“How could the girl not know?” his father snapped.

“Sakura healed me once during the mission, but I do not believe that she meant to heal my eyes.”

Tsunade took a deep breath to calm her mounting anger, trying to remember that she was not allowed to punch clan heirs that were being purposely vague and dancing around the point and wearing “I know something you don’t know” smirks through walls.

Fugaku appeared to be equally fed up with his son’s roundabout answers. “Explain yourself, Itachi.”

The man gave a small sigh. “I don’t know exactly how it works, but Sakura used a jutsu that Shisui said she called Reverse Creation Rebirth on me. . .”

“She did what?” Tsunade gasped.

“Like is said, I don’t know how the jutsu worked, but my teammates said that it completely healed
all my injuries in a matter of minutes. I think that it is possible that her jutsu was responsible for healing my eyes.”

Tsunade furiously rubbed her forehead, trying to fend off her migraine. This mission had gotten way out of hand. The only chuunin on the mission, who she had expressly ordered to stay out of the way, had been taken hostage, the Akatsuki had gotten involved and she had no clue what to do with the immortal in two pieces, and now Sakura was capable of performing unheard of miracles.

She sent a runner to fetch Sakura, not giving a damn about the hour. If she wasn’t going to get any sleep that night, the reason for it shouldn’t get any either. And that girl wouldn’t be leaving until Tsunade had confirmed every detail in triplicate.

-JOUNIN-

Sakura was not happy about the late night summons. It wasn’t that late night summons from the Hokage were a bad thing. Or unusual for her, her shishou was forever demanding that Sakura come in for the most mundane things at some very inconvenient hours. To be fair, most of the time they just meant an emergency sprung up and she was needed. Normally it wouldn’t bother her much, but she had just returned from a potentially traumatic mission and she just wanted to relax.

But instead she stretched and quickly dressed (she had only been in her bed for about three hours) and followed the runner to the hospital.

Sakura hadn’t been the only one called in by the Hokage. Shisui and Genma were also present. Her confusion as to why they were meeting at the hospital was cleared when the three were let into an examination room where they found Itachi, Fugaku, Mikoto and Tsunade-sama.

“Something has come up so I want the four of you to recount your mission now. Do not leave out any details.” The Hokage threatened.

Sakura sweated nervously as they retold the mission. Itachi went first and she found it interesting to learn what the other three had been doing after she had foolishly gotten herself captured by the Hand of God. Before they had gained entrance to the cult, Itachi, Shisui, and Genma had systematically searched each building in the town trying to find where she was being held prisoner and any other possible businesses that were being controlled by the cult. She didn’t care much for the mentioning of sacrifices they had to participate in, even if they weren’t the one to kill the civilian. She knew and understood it was a necessary evil so that they would not be found out, but she hated to think that one day she would have to kill on a mission.

Shisui’s and Genma’s accounts were told quickly seeing as they were basically the same thing with just a few small differences. Then it was her turn. The rosette explained how Itachi had given her the task of finding out what she could about the Hand of God from stall vendor owners and people at the market where gossip was common. She did not catch her shishou’s murderous look towards said man or his guilty look in response.

She continued on to describe how she had literally ran into a member of the cult and how he dragged her to a bar owned by the cult and how it resulted in her being taken captive in a hotel operated by the Hand of God. She was interrupted to be fiercely scolded for not using the brains she was supposed to have. Her months in captivity were probably the nicest any ninja ever experienced, so she did no dwell on it.

Sakura picked up again with the arrival of the leader who turned out to be Hidan of the Akatsuki. She didn’t mention the threat to rape her for Itachi had already brought it up and she didn’t want to think of it. She rushed through the sacrificial rituals she had been forced to watch, already positive
she was going to have nightmares for weeks to come. She did not need to revisit it during the day too.

From there she explained the battle in which they had been outmatched, detailing how she discovered how Hidan’s jutsu worked. She said it was luck that Shisui and Genma had managed to block both of Hidan’s arms and give her the opportunity to take the Jashinist by surprise.

She received a couple of raised eyebrows from Tsunade, Shisui, and Genma.

“Then I returned to Itachi-tachiou’s side and finished healing him.”

Tsunade’s amber eyes took on a dangerous glint. “Finished healing? Do you mean to tell me that you did not heal him completely before joining the fight against Hidan?”

“Well . . . I, yes,” Sakura admitted, “but I healed his most life threatening wounds first!” she rushed to add when it looked like her shishou was going snap her in two.

The Godaime Hokage didn’t look any happier at her student’s admission. In fact, it only seemed to make her angrier. “You were the medic on this mission! You were not supposed to get involved! You should have ignored Itachi’s orders to question the townspeople! I don’t give a damn if he was your captain for this mission; the orders I expressly gave you forbade you from performing in any capacity other than that as the team’s medic!

“And you didn’t even do that!” Sakura flinched as if the blonde woman had physically struck her. “Instead of healing a wounded teammate potentially close to death, you threw a couple of band-aids on him so you could fight a fucking Akatsuki member! You’re lucky you weren’t alone on that mission otherwise you would be dead!”

The pinkette hung her head as her Hokage and shishou rightfully tore strips out of her. She had received direct orders to only act as the medic so not as to endanger herself. She knew this mission had been out of her league and the only way that Tsunade allowed her to take the mission was her promise to obey orders to stay on the back lines. Not that it really mattered. As a shinobi of the Village Hidden in the Leaves, Sakura should have been following her Hokage’s orders without question.

Instead she disobeyed her orders, endangered herself, her teammates, and the mission, and broke the Medic’s Code.

Tsunade fell silent. Sakura raised her head to meet the older woman’s eyes. She dropped her eyes once more and took in a deep breath to mentally prepare herself for the crushing disappointment she would feel when her shishou demoted her or stripped her of her rank completely or ended her apprenticeship.

“Sakura.”

She straightened her posture. If this was going to be her last day as a ninja she was not going to have it end with her staring guiltily at the ugly white tiles of the hospital floor. She met the Hokage’s eyes with acceptance for her punishment visible.

“What jutsu did you use to heal Itachi?”

Green eyes blinked back at her confused. ‘Tsunade-shishou wants to know what jutsu I used? But surely she knows. Didn’t Itachi tell her?’ He had already told Sakura before they returned that he knew what jutsu used.

Perhaps Shisui and Genma didn’t tell Itachi everything and so he couldn’t tell Tsunade-sama the
details. Or maybe that’s what her shishou wanted, just the details.

“Sakura!”

“Hai, sorry. I used the Reverse Creation Rebirth Jutsu.”

“Yes, Itachi has already told me that.” Tsunade nodded. “What I want to know is what exactly is that jutsu is.”

“Oh. It’s a modified version of your Creation Rebirth Technique. Instead of the caster’s cells regenerating, I send the chakra to a patient and it’s the recipient of the chakra cells that are regenerated. Essentially, I made it so your jutsu could be used on someone other than the caster of the jutsu.”

Sakura answered her shishou matter of factly. It was quite common for Tsunade to randomly quiz her and expect her to be able to answer intelligently, efficiently, completely, and immediately. Her favorite pop quiz subjects involved medical ninjutsus and their affects, the uses of different medicinal ingredients, and the chemical breakdown of poisons and their antidotes. Personally, Sakura believed she could practically be a walking medical encyclopedia, which in afterthought might have been the point of the spontaneous questions.

“I see. So you adjusted the jutsu I designed and created so it would affect a second person.” Tsunade said blandly.

Sweat gathered on the back of Sakura’s neck. Had she been wrong after all? Was she still going to be removed from the ninja rosters?

“Congratulations, Sakura.”

‘Huh?’ the rosette stared at her shishou in disbelief.

“I’m giving you a field promotion. Due to your outstanding skills in, mastery of, and creation of, medical ninjutsus, I am naming you a tokubetsu jounin.” Tsunade smiled at Sakura, her eyes full of warmth and pride.

“But, why?”

“What do you mean why? Do you know what you’ve done? The jutsu you created has healed Itachi’s deteriorating natural eyesight caused by strain from overuse of his Sharingan.” Excitement exuded from the blonde woman. “I’ve been working my ass off since I returned to this village to fix this, and here you come along and modify my jutsu, which I never even thought to do, and completely fix his eyes.

“Sakura, you more than have the talent to be a medical tokubetsu jounin, so I’m promoting you.”

“Thank you!” she cried, bowing at the waist. Sakura was internally dancing with excitement. She was officially a jounin. She hadn’t been expecting to get the title so soon or so easily. She thought she would have to prove to the Council or someone that she had the ability to be named a tokubetsu jounin. Although she supposed fixing a flaw in a kekkei genkai proved her medical prowess.

Now she would be able to be Hanabi’s jounin sensei when she graduated!

-JOUNIN-

Sakura no longer felt annoyed that she had been woken up after only a few hours of sleep, and
she was much too excited to be able to go back to sleep. In order to release the excitement that threatened to burst out of her, the pink haired teen decided to go to Team Gai’s training grounds and practice taijutsu.

It was still late, or maybe it was early. The sun wouldn’t be coming up for over an hour still.

But Sakura didn’t let that bother her. She threw herself into her katas, running through each taijutsu style she had learned from Gai-sensei. However, the physical exercise seemed to have the opposite effect of the one she was hoping for. Instead of it tiring her out, she found herself more hyped than ever. She could now step up her training in the other areas that she had let slide so she could gain the Special High Jounin title.

And who better to help her with her taijutsu than Gai-sensei. She had arrived for practice even earlier than he did and they would be able to train all day. It had the added bonus of her seeing him for the first time in months. After three months virtually locked inside all day, it felt wonderful to stretch her legs and see people who weren’t Shouta every day. Sakura had found herself missing the spandex wearing sensei and his cries of youth.

She didn’t have to miss them much longer. The sun’s rays had barely risen over the Hokage Mountain when the green duo raced through the training grounds on their hands. Sakura smiled delightedly, so excited to be in the open and able to train in the first time in three months and to be back home and falling back into her typical schedule. She settled against the base of a tree to wait out this day’s early morning challenge, knowing that talking to either before the race was finished was useless.

500 laps later, Sakura found it unbelievable that Lee was still able to improve his taijutsu abilities. Three months away and now it seemed like her first day training with Team Gai where both taijutsu experts wiped the floor with her. It caused stitches in her side to even think about doing it herself.

“Good morning, Gai-sensei, Lee-san. Who won this time?” the strawberry haired teen called to the two cheerily.

“Sakura-chan!”

“My youthful blossom of springtime has returned!”

“Gai-sensei won, of course. Gai-sensei has no match when it comes to taijutsu. He is the greatest taijutsu master ever!” Lee continued on in that vein for a while, enthusiastically declaring each and every of Gai-sensei’s numerous achievements. Sakura would swear under pain of interrogation from Ibiki that the taller of the clones flushed a deep red.

If not for the arrival of Tenten and Neji, the pinkette thought Lee’s singing praises of his sensei’s achievements would never end.

“Good morning, Lee, Sakura, Gai-sensei. SAKURA!” The brunette launched herself at Sakura and tackled the younger girl to the ground. “God, it is so great to have you back. Neji has been moping around ever since you left on that mission all worried that you wouldn’t come back. I told him he needed to have more faith in you.”

“I trusted Sakura would come back.” Said male interrupted.

“But not without a missing limb. He was so tense and uptight, like before you guys started dating. But never mind that. How did the mission go? Why were you gone for three months? What were you doing? Details, girl, details.”
Sakura laughed as Neji shoved Tenten off her and helped her to her feet, making sure to stand at her side with one arm wrapped around her shoulder in an obvious attempt to ward off the weapon mistress and her questions. “There’s not much I can actually tell you. Tsunade-shishou had to temporarily place me on an Anbu team in need of a medic, so.”

The fourteen year old girl didn’t finish, not that she needed to. Every ninja knew that Anbu missions were secret and that no detail could be revealed. “But I did get a promotion to special jounin!”

Tenten snatched her out of Neji’s grip, rather easily as his hold on her had relaxed substantially at her mention of promotion, and drew her into a three way impromptu dance/hug combination with Lee, already making plans for a celebratory dinner later that night at a new restaurant.

Gai-sensei took a leaf out of Kakashi-sensei’s book, ruffling her hair, before separating his three students and starting the day’s training session. He took her aside to train her personally today. Tsunade hadn’t given him all the detail, but she had informed the taijutsu expert that she had spent three months in captivity and would need a little work to get her taijutsu skills back up to par before he could start her on anything new.

None of the others commented on her training, which consisted of repeated katas for taijutsu styles she already knew. When training ended sometime after noon, Sakura vowed to never skip out on her daily katas, stamina, and endurance practice again. It didn’t matter to her that she couldn’t train for the last three months for fear of being discovered as a kunoichi and killed early. After three months of no sparring or running she felt like a fresh out of the academy gennin. Today’s practice wiped her out more than she thought it would.

She rushed to catch up to her boyfriend, who was already leaving, and latched onto his arm. “Where do you want to go for lunch? I’ll pay today.” Sakura gazed up at him earnestly.

Sakura was surprised and discomforted by the closed off expression she saw on his face. Neji had had no need to guard his emotions when there were dating, and he had never done so, but now he was staring down at her with the face she had first seen him wearing her first day training with Team Gai. It was devoid of any emotion. Cold. Blank. Hard.

“Neji?”

“I cannot make it today, Sakura. Please accept my apologies.”

The stiffness and over polite way of speaking worried Sakura even more. She could not understand why her boyfriend was treating her like this. Like she was some annoying little girl. She tried to brush it off, explaining it as worry for her and his being busy, but he didn’t offer another day that would work and made excuses for every day she offered.

Sakura watched him go, his back ramrod straight, and found herself fighting off irrational tears. Neji wasn’t being cruel or hurtful to her. He just had other duties he had to attend to. But she knew that wasn’t true. Neji had never missed an after mission dinner, whether or not he had been a member, unless he was on his own mission. He always found a way to be there with her.

And now, her boyfriend was doing everything in his power to get away from her.

She wanted to go home and cry. So she did. It wasn’t like she had anywhere else to be. Team 7 was still out of commission.

-JOUNIN-

Shikamaru stared disinterestedly at the ceiling above his bed. He had been awake for over half an
hour now but couldn’t find it in himself to actually get out of bed. For some unfathomable reason, the pineapple haired brunette thought it was to take his mind off his still on a mission out of her league sister; the Fifth Hokage had assigned him to help with the preparations of the chuunin selection exams which would start later this month.

But it was so much work, and honestly Shikamaru found it all too troublesome. And it did nothing to keep him from thinking of his pink haired sister and all the trouble she could be in. It was already almost mid-April, and Sakura hadn’t returned yet. Even his mother and father were starting to worry. It was unlike the Hokage to send chuunin on missions that lasted over a month, but Sakura had been gone over three.

What was really annoying was that this mission caused them to miss her first birthday with them as a true family. They had had this celebration planned out for weeks, expecting her back well before her fourteenth birthday. But that was not the case.

Shikamaru groaned. Thinking about Sakura would not do him any good. No news right now was good news. It meant nothing went drastically wrong. So he forced himself out of bed, grateful that his mother let him sleep until two, and mentally prepared himself for hours on end of fighting over the safety precautions of the exams as they tried to make them harder than his own.

He made his way into the kitchen, going through the many arguments he could use to convince his mother to make him some lunch before he left, and found a familiar head of pink digging through the freezer.

Shikamaru blinked, sure that he was dreaming. And when he opened his eyes and still saw pink he wasted no time in hugging his sister in the tightest hug he had ever given her.

“You’re back, finally.” He buried his face in her pink locks.

“Yeah.”

Shikamaru pulled back at the disappointed tone and scratchy voice at which with she replied. Sakura turned around, revealing a face that was blotchy, blood shot eyes, a slightly runny nose, and quite obvious tear tracks down her cheeks. “Are you alright?”

The pinkette wiped at her eyes, only making the skin around them even more red, “I’m fine Shikamaru. We all made it back safely.”

Her brother gave a minute sigh of relief, glad that she wasn’t crying because someone had died on their mission. He knew she would take that to mean her skills weren’t good enough. “Then what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.” She said softly. “Neji, he’s. . . he’s distancing himself from me. He can’t go on our after mission dinner.” Shikamaru found alarm in those words. He knew how hard Neji worked in order to make those dinners. If he was missing one on purpose something had to be wrong.

“Neji kept making excuses. To not eat with me. And I don’t know why.” Sakura’s tears started anew.

Shikamaru pushed aside the various meats stored in the freezer and pulled out the chocolate ice cream reserved for occasions like this (which including when the pink haired kunoichi was PMSing), grabbed a spoon, and led his little sister to her room. Sakura immediately set into devouring the carton of ice cream while Shikamaru soothed her fears.

He left a peacefully sleeping Sakura an hour later with an empty container. He had told her that
Neji would come to his senses soon and this would all blow over.

Shikamaru didn’t mention that he would come to his senses because he was going to beat the shit out of him. He threw the ice cream carton away and left the Nara compound, for once not lethargic and muttering under his breath about the work he was going to have to do that day.

Instead he whistled as he walked calmly down the streets, hands in his pockets, in search of Kakashi Hatake, who would no doubt enjoy joining in on his impromptu beat on Neji session.

-JOUNIN-

Sakura was woken, not by Yoshino as she was expecting, but by Hanabi, which she should have expected. The not yet ten year old Hyuuga had leapt onto her bed, startling her awake and receiving a chakra enhanced punch for it, and proceeding to drag her out into the forest in the Nara’s backyard.

She surprised her further by dropping to her knees. “Please don’t stop training me, Sakura-sensei!”

The petal haired girl stared nonplussed at the younger girl kneeling at her feet. “Stop training you? Why would I do that, Hanabi?”

Hanabi jumped to her feet, relief that her training with Sakura wasn’t over evident on her face. “Well, you and Neji-niisan broke up so I thought that you might avoid me because he’s my cousin, but I’m so glad you’re not. You were gone so long. I trained every day. Just yesterday I almost healed the fish.”

The youngest Hyuuga continued to ramble on how her training had progressed while Sakura was on her mission, but Sakura didn’t hear a word of it. Hanabi said that she and Neji had broken up. Had Neji told his family they were no longer dating? Why? He didn’t say anything to her.

The words echoed in her head. She trained Hanabi for a couple of hours on autopilot as she attempted to reason Neji’s decision on informing his family about ending their relationship, which they hadn’t discussed in any shape or form or agreed on.

But her mind came up blank. She hadn’t even been around the last three months. There was no possible way she could have upset him somehow. Unless the problem was her not being around. Did he not want to date someone who could be out of the village for months on end?

She rejected that idea. It couldn’t be because she had been on a long term mission. Both she and Neji were ninja. They both understood that the other would sometimes be assigned long term missions. He would never hold that against her. She would never blame him for being gone for three months.

‘But what if he decided he didn’t want to date a kunoichi? What if he wanted a girlfriend that would wait at home for him with dinner waiting on the table?’

Sakura shook her head violently. Neji wasn’t like that. He couldn’t stand a woman that couldn’t look after herself. He would never want to date a lower level kunoichi that only dealt with D-rank or in the village C-rank missions.

She barely managed to pull herself out of her thoughts in time to tell Hanabi that she had been promoted to special jounin. The younger girl had hugged her, exclaiming how great it was, now Sakura would be able to be her jounin sensei when she graduated in a year and a half.

She watched her go, just like she had with her cousin earlier. She didn’t want to think so little of Neji that he would end their relationship without talking to her because of her duties, but she could...
find no other reason for Neji’s unusual behavior.

She didn’t want to believe that he would break up because she was gone for three months. She couldn’t control how long a mission took.

But then why did he say they had broken up?

-JOUNIN-

Shikamaru returned home after quite happily threatening one Neji Hyuuga, royal jackass extraordinaire.

The spikey haired chuunin had found Kakashi rather easily. He wasted no time pondering over the why the elusive Copy-Cat ninja was so easy to find, and went right to inviting Sakura’s sensei to the surprise party for one Neji Hyuuga later that day.

The silver haired jounin’s eye had curved and a clearly evil smile was visible underneath his mask.

The two males then set off in search of Neji, made super easy with the help of Kakashi’s nin-dogs who were all too happy to help them hunt down the person that had hurt Sakura.

Neji had taken one look at them and tried to flee.

He was halted in his tracks by Shikamaru’s shadow jutsu and trapped in a genjutsu courtesy of Kakashi’s Sharingan.

Sense was beaten into the prideful Hyuuga, who promised to speak to Sakura the next day, and Shikamaru and Kakashi happily parted ways.

So, Shikamaru had returned home with the happy news to give his sister, and instead found her sobbing hysterically in his mother’s arms.

Neji had conveniently forgotten to mention that he had broken up with his little sister.

The Nara genius helped his mother put Sakura to sleep and left in search of Kakashi for the second time that day. He had conveniently forgotten to tell Neji about the after party, which Tsunade-sama would also be invited to.

-JOUNIN-

Sakura threw herself into hospital shifts and missions despite her family’s pleas that she take it easy. It was easier for her to not think about Neji if she was otherwise occupied. And the chaos of missions and the hospital and training and her own research into creating new jutsus did just that. She found herself too busy to think about Neji and his nonexistent reasons for ending their relationship.

Tsunade assigned her either solo missions or ones where she didn’t work with him. Shikamaru stuck to her side and fielded away any unwanted questions about her mission or where her boyfriend was and unwanted people too.

She had bumped into Sasuke once. Apparently Mikoto wanted her to come over for dinner again. He had delivered his mother’s message with a sneer and the announcement that he wouldn’t be present because he was training for the chuunin exams and stormed away.

Sakura had had to seriously restrain herself from punching him clear across the village. She didn’t ask to be invited. And his horrendous attitude regarding her was grating on her fraying nerves.
She just didn’t understand how he could possibly blame her for his lack of promotion. It wasn’t her fault he was lacking in the skills a chuunin required.

Dissuading her brother from coming with her was no small feat and took a promise to help with his work for the week.

Dinner with the Uchihas was as formal as always. Sakura felt out of place sitting at the table. The three Uchihas all had dark hair and dark eyes and she stuck out like a sore thumb with pink hair and green eyes. Those dark eyes stared at her while she ate.

It seemed like ages before Mikoto spoke.

“That’s both our sons you’ve saved now, Sakura-chan.”

“I really didn’t save Sasuke, Mikoto-sama.”

“Just Mikoto dear, and you did. You have saved both Itachi and Sasuke.”

“But any medic could have save Sasuke.” Sakura tried.

“Yes, that’s true.” Sakura’s shoulders relaxed, “But it was you who did. And no one else could have saved Itachi. You have our thanks.”

The pinkette flushed a bright red and stammered about not needing any thanks. The Uchiha matriarch nodded at her to humor her and then made Sakura promise to recognize the second debt they owed her. Sakura had done her best to convince Mikoto that they needn’t owe her any favors, but Itachi had joined in and cornered her into admitting to being owed two favors from the Uchiha family.

Once the conversation was over, Sakura swore to never save another Uchiha’s life. If every incident resulted in her being invited for uncomfortable dinners where she was demanded to acknowledge open ended favors, she would never save another Uchiha again. Anything to keep her out of this situation.

-JOUNIN-

Itachi watched amused as he ate as his little brother’s once teammate tried to deny the favors the Uchiha clan owed her. She turned red so quickly and was very adamant that she was only doing her job and therefore needed no reward.

Personally, he disagreed. While it was true it was her job as a medic to heal, she wasn’t actually qualified when she had healed his foolish little brother at last year’s chuunin exams and it wasn’t certainly necessary for her to do so.

As for him, it was his fault she had been capture by the Hand of God cult in the first place, a reason he felt she deserved a favor from him alone. He had contradicted her orders from the Hokage and let her spend three months thinking she was going to die. Sakura certainly deserved compensation for that. The girl had gone above and beyond on that mission to take as few as risks as possible, and his plan had endangered the young girl who shouldn’t have been on the mission in the first place.

But Sakura had endured. She slipped them information in the middle of the night that helped them infiltrate quickly and naturally and without suspicion. She had faced down Hidan when he was about to kill her, trusting that they would rescue her as promised. Itachi had felt guilty when she
had mentioned Hidan. He had briefly thought about aborting the mission, leaving Sakura to be killed. The thought had returned on the night she was to be sacrificed. It would have been so easy to surprise Hidan from behind if he was focused on killing Sakura.

Itachi had hated himself for thinking like that. The mission was important, but it never meant sacrificing teammates. Especially young teenage girls that weren’t supposed to be there.

If it wasn’t for Sakura, Itachi believed all three of them would have died that day. Had any other medic been the replacement, that mission would have been a failure. It was because of Sakura that Hidan’s grasp on him was broken. It was Sakura that derailed his immortality and cut Hidan down to size. And it was Sakura that healed his life where no medic, not even the Lady Hokage, could have.

So he had voiced his opinion, siding with his mother, and convinced Sakura to agree to accept the favors. Itachi was already planning on asking if she planned to join Anbu. He would personally train her if she decided to.

“Sakura-chan, we have another favor we would like to ask of you.”

Itachi’s eyes bore into his mother. When he had been informed of tonight’s dinner, he was told it was to thank Sakura for saving his life. His mother had not mentioned asking the girl a favor. He did not see why she had any right to ask one of her.

“We would like your help in healing members of our clan. We would like for you to be the Uchiha Clan’s personal medic.” His mother pleaded.

The eldest Uchiha son watched Sakura’s face as it lit up in surprise. Personal medic was quite an honor for any medic but even more so for her since she was so young. But it would also be a lot of responsibility for her. It meant that she would be the only medic allowed to work with the Uchihas. Every injured Uchiha, no matter how insignificant or severe, would only be seen by her. It also meant a lot of visits to the Uchiha compound, which he was sure she was starting to dislike considering how his family had gained on her every time she came.

He had his suspicions as to why his mother was asking Sakura for a favor. The girl’s jutsu had unintentionally healed his eyes. With her it would be easy to restore every Uchihas Sharingan. His clan would never have to worry about the consequences of achieving the higher levels of the Sharingan if this little girl could so easily repair all damage done with a single jutsu.

To his astonishment she accepted.

“As you already know, you healed Itachi’s kekkei genkai. His Sharingan was causing his normal eyesight to deteriorate. Fugaku and I were hoping you would consider doing the same for the rest of the clan.”

Itachi spoke before Sakura could answer. “I do not believe that is feasible, mother. Sakura-san’s jutsu requires a lot of chakra and made her lose consciousness for ten days. It would not be practical for her to heal everyone in that manner.”

“He’s right. It takes weeks to store the necessary chakra to use the technique. It’s certainly not the fast solution you’re looking for.” His mother seemed to wilt in disappointment. “But it’s not impossible. I could use it to heal some while I research another method. It might be possible for me to find an easier way to heal the Sharingan if I was able to study it.”

“So you’ll try? Oh, thank you, Sakura-chan. This is so great. It really means a lot to us that you’re willing to fix our clan’s kekkei genkai. We owe you so much.”
Itachi was bemused when he saw Sakura give in so easily to his mother this time. Then again, perhaps she had seen it was pointless to try and deny his mother. She certainly wasn’t going to let the pink haired kunoichi forget that the Uchiha clan owed her three times over.

-JOUNIN-

Sakura was up bright and early the next morning. Remembering the last time she had unexpectedly and without explanation not shown up for practice, she informed Gai-sensei that she wouldn’t be able to make his afternoon training sessions. Gai-sensei had been disappointed that she couldn’t attend training, but he still encouraged her to come in the mornings like she always had and said she was welcome to join in whenever she wanted. She appreciated the sentiment, but doubted she would be coming back to team training anytime soon.

She dove into medical journals, tomes on anatomy, researched the eye until she was ready to drop from exhaustion. Sakura had been handed opportunity on a silver platter last night. If she could completely heal the Uchiha’s Sharingan, she would be recognized as a master medical kunoichi in her own rights. She would truly achieve her dream of passing Tsunade-shishou.

Her recreation of Tsunade’s jutsu was an amazing accomplishment for her age, for any medical ninja if she was honest with herself. The only thing harder than manipulating preexisting jutsus was creating new ones. She was the only one that could fix the Sharingan, but she wanted to find a more efficient way to do so.

Between her hospital shifts, missions, training, and eventually teaching she planned on when Hanabi graduated, it would be slow going. It would take weeks for her to find the time to store the chakra necessary to use her Reverse Creation Rebirth technique in her spare time, maybe even months. And with how much it taxed her, unconscious for days and low on chakra, it would take her years to get through every Uchiha suffering progressing blindness from their kekkei genkai.

Hopefully, with a better understand of the workings of the Sharingan and the eye in general, she would be able to locate what caused them to start going blind and fix it.

Sakura researched like a mad woman possessed. She holed herself up in her office during her shifts and was only called on to deal with emergencies and Uchihas. Tsunade only sent her on missions when her skill set was absolutely required. She continued to teach Hanabi the basics of medical ninjutsu and simple earth style ninjutsu. She still kept up with her ninjutsu, taijutsu, and genjutsu training, but every other minute of the day was devoted to learning everything there was to know about the inner mechanics of the eye; its composition, how it worked, how it switched to the Sharingan and back, the effects switching had on the eyes.

The young medic had already learned a lot from examining Itachi’s Sharingan and from what he had told her about it. The Sharingan consisted of two parts: the Eye of Insight and the Eye of Hypnotism. The Eye of Insight is what allowed wielders of the Sharingan to see the flow of chakra. It gave chakra a color, and the wielder could differentiate between the different types of chakra. It even allowed them to detect the presence of genjutsu, because the chakra flow of someone under a genjutsu was irregular.

The Eye of Hypnotism basically boiled down to increased perception. It gave them the ability to easily recognize genjutsu and allowed them to pick up on subtle details, like reading lips or copying the motions of a pencil like Sasuke did during the first test of the chuunin exams. The more tomoe seals that had evolved in the eye, the stronger their ability of perception, to the point where they could track speed and predict movement.

Its copying ability was unparalleled. So long as it wasn’t a kekkei genkai, the Sharingan could copy any technique witnessed to near perfection. It didn’t matter if it was ninjutsu, taijutsu, or
genjutsu. Just copying didn’t mean they could use the technique, a fact that made Sakura feel better about her time with Sasuke. It meant that all his ability didn’t come from copying from others who had worked hard to earn the skills they have. In order to use the copied technique they already had to possess the necessary skill or ability.

The Sharingan was capable of hypnosis. With simple eye contact, the wielder can suggest thoughts and actions through genjutsu. This made Uchihas seem like they were capable of seeing the future, but it was all just a really elaborate illusion. And Sakura would be the only person that would ever know they couldn’t.

Although the Sharingan consumed the user’s chakra while active, the chakra levels that needed to be exerted were so insignificant that it could be activated constantly.

All of that had been carefully detailed into a scroll. The secrets of the Sharingan were impressive, even more so when Sakura learned that there was more beyond what the Uchihas called the simple Sharingan.

There were the initial, secondary, and matured stages of the simple Sharingan. Sakura had been told that Uchihas weren’t born with the Sharingan, contrary to popular belief like the Hyuugas were with their Byakugan, but it was unlocked under some stressful or emotional condition. The different stages varied in the number of tomoe they had.

After the simple Sharingan was the Mangekyō Sharingan. Achieving the Mangekyō Sharingan granted the wielder access to more powerful techniques. The tomoe of the Mangekyō Sharingan was different, and the appearance varied from user to user. Some of the Mangekyō Sharingan’s abilities included the otherwise uncontrollable black fires Amaterasu, the almost unbreakable genjutsu Tsukuyomi, and sometimes Susanoo, a manipulative skeletal barrier made of Amaterasu flames. The abilities usually awakened in separate eyes, but if they developed together the user gained control of space-time ninjutsu like Kamui, which allowed for the shifting of dimensions.

Amaterasu was the highest level fire release technique known. The jet-black flames of the Amaterasu, said to be the fires from hell that are as hot as the sun, ignite at the focus of the user's vision. They are capable of burning through anything in their path and can smother other fire jutsus. It supposedly never stops burning, although it has been noted to burn rather slowly, and was often the cause for the eye’s bleeding.

Tsukuyomi is one of the most powerful, if not the most, genjutsus in existence, and it is exclusive to the Uchiha clan. It requires eye contact and traps the target in a genjutsu entirely of the user’s control. Itachi was capable of altering the perception of time in the illusion. Due to the complexity of the illusion and the quickness with which it is executed, an enormous amount of chakra is necessary. Before she had stumbled onto the cure all solution, using the Tsukuyomi further decreased Itachi’s vision in his left eye.

Susanoo creates a gigantic, humanoid being that surrounds the user. As one of the strongest techniques granted to those that have acquired the Mangekyō Sharingan, it is the user's guardian deity, but at the same time, it consumes the user's life. Activating the Susanoo is a rarity, for it strains the body as well as the eyes and consumes a large amount of chakra. It is literally the materialization of the user’s chakra, capable of moving freely. It wasn’t an impenetrable defense, but it was a pretty damn good one.

Kamui allowed the user to transfer any object to another dimension. It is a unique and specialized time-space ninjutsu that allows for teleportation and intangibility.

It was the Mangekyō Sharingan that strained the Uchihas’ eyes and eroded their vision, leading eventually to blindness. The only solution the clan had currently was transplanting a close
relation’s eyes. The new Sharingan was called the Eternal Mangekyō Sharingan and meant the user no longer went blind. However, the Uchiha clan didn’t like that solution, which was the whole reason for their asking her to find a new one that didn’t involve eye transplants, one that truly healed the Sharingan.

One of the scrolls the Uchihas had given her made a mention to the Eternal Mangekyō Sharingan being able to progress to the Rinnegan (whatever the hell that was), but didn’t say how.

It also referenced two other powerful and unique genjutsu: Izanagi and Izanami, which altered or decided one’s destiny, respectively. Using Izanagi, the user could warp reality for a short amount of time, changing reality into illusion and illusion into reality, thus escaping death and rewriting destiny; although to make use of this technique to its full extent, the user had to have the DNA of both the Uchiha and Senju clans. When activated, the caster removed the boundaries between reality and illusion within their personal space. To a degree this allowed the user to control their own state of existence, but it is normally only active for the briefest of moments.

Izanami, on the other hand, is a genjutsu that traps the victim in an infinite loop disregarding their five senses; this technique was specifically created to counter anyone who would abuse Izanagi’s ability to alter their destiny, by forcing the victims to relive the situation over and over until they accepted it and ceased using Izanagi. Both techniques have been labeled kinjutsu, because use of either caused the eye that performed Izanagi or Izanami to close forever.

Kinjutsu were techniques that were banned from being taught or used because they were either one, techniques that caused extreme harm to one’s self, or two, techniques that violate the laws of nature.

Sakura had been very surprised that the Uchihas had willing handed over everything they knew on their kekkei genkai to her. She had expected to have been given a little bit now, and more later when she proved that she could heal the Sharingan completely and wasn’t going to run off and blackmail the clan with what she had learned.

The chakra pathway system, the chakra coils through which chakra traversed, contained 361 nodes, tenketsu, that controlled the flow of chakra like a circuit. The chakra pathway system was enmeshed into the body like blood cells, touching and interacting with every other cell it came into contact with and passed through every organ.

With enough practice, a ninja could release chakra from any one of the 361 chakra nodes, although most could only do it from the hands and feet whereas the Hyuuga style focused on being able to release chakra through any and every of the 361 tenketsu.

The chakra coils led to all parts of the body, including the eyes. Right behind each eye was a tenketsu. In order to activate the Sharingan, chakra had to be focused into these tenketsu. The tenketsu was connected to the hyaloid canal, a small transparent canal running through the vitreous body of the eye from the back of the lens to the optic disc just in front of the tenketsu. The hyaloid served no purpose besides the embryological one before birth. From what Sakura had observed, in doujutsu users, the hyaloid canal was modified to allow chakra flow through the eye. But the canal, never having been intended for that purpose, was torn apart by the unnatural influx of chakra, which caused the bleeding and blindness experienced by Sharingan users.

So all Sakura had to do was fix the hyaloid canal and then restructure it so it could support the flow of chakra in and through the eyes. Then the Sharingan would never deteriorate again.

She attended another dinner with the Uchiha family (still without Sasuke who had yet to return from the chuunin exams in Kirigakure), wryly thinking she went to more of the Uchiha family dinners than she did her own family’s weekly get togethers, and presented all of her information.
She had quite clearly blown them all out of the water with her work ethic, for none of them expected her to find the permanent solution only two months in. Sakura thought they were also quite surprised that the cause of all their troubles was a little nondescript canal that normally served no purpose. She believed that someone should have found the answer to their problems much sooner.

Even without all the information she had, none of which included much on the physical structure of the Sharingan, all that she had to get from observation (but she was nice enough to include detailed labeled diagrams in her notes), she had easily noticed the canal that was falling into pieces.

Sakura had to assume the Uchihas didn’t let many medics examine their kekkei genkai, and those that did either weren’t talented enough to notice the canal or thought it useless like it was supposed to be, or didn’t have the necessary information to know they were looking for something that wasn’t channeling chakra the way it was supposed to.

Anyhow, all that mattered at the moment was that she, Sakura Haruno Nara, special jounin of two months, age fourteen, apprentice to the Godaime Hokage, a kunoichi from a civilian family, had found the answers that eluded the Uchihas for generations and that she was going to heal each and every Uchiha that was losing his sight (something weird that she had noticed, no females had ever awakened the Sharingan).

They hammered out the details of Sakura’s plans. She would return next week to intensively study various stages of deterioration of the hyaloid canal, from newly awakened Sharingans to those of an Uchiha who was blind or nearly blind, and compare them to the result of her Reverse Creation Rebirth jutsu that had completely fixed Itachi’s canals. From there she would develop a technique specified to healing that canal.

And all of this information would be stored within the clan’s scrolls and they would eventually be able to teach their own medics, if they ever found any with the control necessary for such a dangerous, risky, and delicate procedure, how to do this technique and they would never have to worry about the higher levels of the Sharingan causing blindness again.

Sakura had felt she was completely justified in the smugness she was reveling in and convinced, bribed really, her brother into taking her out for dinner the next day, which she hadn’t done for two months because she had practically locked herself in her office or her room and buried herself in all research eye related. The pinkette was of the opinion that a nice dinner was really well deserved, and she stuck with that opinion.

Until Neji walked into the same diner.

Sakura had recognized his chakra as soon as it was within thirty meters of her. She had ignored it right up until he had strode through the doors with another Hyuuga.

Seeing him with another girl, even one that was a Hyuuga, caused her heart to break all over again. The two of them hadn’t talked in the two months since she had returned from her mission and he randomly and unreasonably broke up with her. Sakura had taken great care to avoid him, not that he seemed to be searching for her or even trying to get in touch with her.

Now it appeared she finally had her answer. He had found another girl. She had been replaced.

-JOUNIN-

Sakura now dedicated her free time to extra training. It was great as a therapeutic way to vent her frustrations at annoying ex-boyfriends that didn’t have the decency to break up with her properly.
Unsurprisingly, it wasn’t very difficult to fix the hyaloid canal once she saw how it was supposed to work. Two weeks of tinkering with jutsus that dealt with the eyes and she had created one that worked specifically to rebuild and strengthen the canal so it could handle the influx of chakra needed to activate and maintain the Sharingan.

Sasuke had returned a couple of days ago, quite pleased with himself for making chuunin. Sakura would swear on pain of death that he strutted through the gates like a peacock showing off his feathers. His holier than thou attitude lasted all the way to the Uchiha compound, where he was informed he had to be checked by Sakura for any injuries (“Oh, Sakura-chan agreed to be our personal medic, so you make sure she’s the only one to take care of you at the hospital, Sasuke.”) and so she could fix his hyaloid canal before it reached the point of some of the older clan members.

 Needless to say, Sasuke was not pleased and had to be forcibly dragged to his appointment with the pink haired medic. For the life of her, Sakura could not understand why her former teammate was behaving like a belligerent child with anything concerning her.

Sasuke wasn’t the only one to return to Konoha in a stormy mood. Not even an hour after Tsunade-sama was back Sakura had been called into her office. Her shishou’s greeting was a book thrown at her that would have taken off her head had she not ducked.

Sakura pulled it out of the wall and started at it curiously. “Why did you throw a bingo book at me?”

“Look at page 47.” The older blonde growled.

Sakura decided it was in her best interests to humor her bad tempered shishou and flipped the book open to page 47.

Then she dropped it.

She picked it up again with shaky hands and laid it down on the Hokage’s desk. “What is… how… why is my picture in the bingo book?”

“That’s what I want to know!” Tsunade shouted. “You’re listed for killing Hidan. Someone out there is making a big deal about the pink haired chuunin that took out an immortal member of the Akatsuki. The only problem is only you, your teammates, the Council, Uchiha’s parents, Shizune, and myself knew that it was you that dealt the last blow.” The slug Sannin’s voice was steadily increasing as her speech continued. “That means that we have a rat. Someone high in Konoha’s politics is leaking information to other villages!”

Sakura could only stare at the picture of her likeness in the bingo book. It listed her hair and eye color, village affiliation, current rank, although it said chuunin, what she was known for, and her bounty. A 2,000,000 ryō bounty. She felt faint just seeing it listed above her name. 2,000,000 ryō was a lot. But, apparently the notoriety you received from killing the unkillable Akatsuki guy makes your head worth 2,000,000 to somebody.

-JOUNIN-

Sakura was surprised when Kakashi informed her of Team 7’s meeting the next morning. She had honestly thought Team 7 was over, what with her being a special jounin, Sasuke a chuunin and Naruto still out of the village for another year and a half.

But it did make her extremely curious as to why her team was being reformed.

And she wasn’t happy with the answer.
Taking into consideration her silver haired sensei’s late arriving habits, Sakura showed up at the bridge ten minutes before he was due, and found Sasuke, her shishou, the Danzou guy from the council who was always disagreeing with the Hokage, and an unknown boy that could have been Sasuke’s twin. Kakashi-sensei was still not there, but Danzou was none too pleased by her lateness and made a snide comment delivered in a bland tone on how late subordinates should be punished like he was talking about how the weather might affect a mission.

Thankfully, for her, Kakashi arrived before she put her fist through the old man’s stomach and got into serious trouble.

“Right, now that you’re all here,” Tsunade leveled Kakashi with a glare, “This is Sai. He will be joining your team.”

And that was it. The Hokage offered no explanation about why she was reinstating Team 7 even though Naruto’s replacement was the only gennin. Judging by the mini craters left behind her, Sakura knew that Tsunade wasn’t happy with the situation either. And that meant the originator behind all this was the man half covered in bandages currently holding a whispered conversation with Sai.

The fourteen year old girl studied Danzou. Knowing that he was the reason for her team being remade only raised more questions. For what purpose would he need Team 7 to be an active team? Why did he get a say in the final member of the team? And where did Sai come from? He looked to be the same age as her and Sasuke, but he wasn’t in their class.

Sai was odd too. As far as she could tell, the guy hadn’t shown one emotion since she got to the bridge, not even curiosity about his new teammates. She hadn’t seen him smile once, and he looked like he had spent all his life underground. He was dressed entirely in black (another reason to think he was Sasuke’s twin), his shirt cut off just under his ribs, showing off a too white abdomen, and carried nothing aside from standard issued pouches at his hip.

Kakashi finally shut his Icha Icha book, which his attention had never left, and gave his students a one eyed grin. “Well, let’s have Sai introduce himself and then we’ll get started.”

-SAKURA WOVES HER STRONGEST GENJUTSU AROUND HER AS SHE HID IN THE THICK LEAVES OF ONE OF THE VARIOUS TREES THAT SURROUND TRAINING GROUND 7. OF COURSE KAKASHI-SENSEI WOULD GIVE THEM THE BELL TEST THIS TIME. IT DIDN’T MATTER THAT SHE AND SASUKE ALREADY KNEW THE REAL PURPOSE OF THERE ONLY BEING TWO Bells.

What mattered this time was whether or not they went out on a limb to help the new guy that didn’t belong on their team. Kakashi was testing to see if they could work with Sai.

The whole point of this test never seemed to cross Sasuke’s mind because the dark haired boy had lunged forward for a frontal attack the second their sensei had yelled begin. And while having improved in the two years since they had taken this test, Sasuke still wasn’t powerful enough to defeat Kakashi on his own, not that she ever thought he was.

Sai seemed pretty content to hang back and observe for the time being. It was a smart strategy. He would be able to observe his opponent from a distance and see hers and Sasuke’s skills for himself and figure where he best fit in, how he could offer the most support, where he could push his advantage, whatever it may be.

She was pretty sure Kakashi-sensei was humoring her and Sai. The whole time he was engaged in
battle with Sasuke, he never completely turned his back on either of them. He clearly knew where they were hiding and was bidding his time with Sasuke, whose ego got in the way of his ability to think logically, until they made their move.

Well, given that her genjutsu was pointless if he already knew where she was, Sakura dispelled the illusion and swiftly made her way to where Sai was skulking in the shadows.

A gentle hand on his shoulder alerted him of her presence. “Hey Sai, this test is really easy. We don’t have to actually steal the bells from Kakashi-sensei.” Black eyes left the battle and turned to her. “Kakashi-sensei just wants to test our teamwork. He wants us to work together.”

Sai tilted his head slightly and continued to stare at her. “If that is true, then why is Duck-san attempting to take the bells from Kakashi-sensei? Is he acting as a diversion for us?”

Sakura blinked. ‘Duck-san?’ Did this guy really just call Sasuke Duck-san? She focused her eyes on the still going, though sort of one sided fight. Now that she thought about it, the back of Sasuke’s hair did sort of resemble the tail feathers of a duck.

It took all of her self control to not start laugh hysterically once she realized the resemblance her teammate had to a duck. A few giggles still slipped passed her lips and she hurried to assure the confused new boy that she wasn’t laughing at him but his accurate name for Sasuke.

“But, anyway, Duck-san is not a diversion. Not intentionally anyways.”

“How so?”

“To put it nicely, Sasuke thinks very highly of his abilities and wanted to test himself one on one against Kakashi sensei.”

“And to put it bluntly?” Sai gave her a smile. It was large and engaging and friendly, but decidedly faked.

“Sasuke is an asshole with an over inflated ego and too cocky and arrogant to know that he doesn’t stand a chance against Kakashi-sensei without assistance and is too stubborn and prideful to ask for help.” Sakura said flatly.

“Yes, that’s what I thought.”

“But it works in our favor. While that idiot is busy with Kakashi-sensei we might be able to surprise him.”

The two hatched together a relatively simple plan that they agreed would work quite nicely. Sai’s ability to bring inked drawings to life (“That’s a really cool jutsu. I’d ask you to teach me but I can’t draw to save my life.”) was unknown to Kakashi-sensei, and would hopefully take him by surprise long enough for Sakura to either get close enough to punch him clear through a half a dozen trees or shatter the ground and have one of Sai’s little ink creatures swoop in and take the bells unnoticed.

Sakura decided, as the waited for an opportune moment for Sai to release his lions, that it was a nice change of pace to have another teammate that could and was willing to strategize with her. No offense to Naruto, but he wasn’t the brightest and Sasuke never thought her capable of developing winning strategies no matter how many times she proved herself.

They were waiting for a chance when the jounin’s back was facing them, as much as he would allow it to, before Sai set loose his lions. Sakura’s vindictiveness played a small part. She really wanted to see some sort of shock or terror on Sasuke’s face when three giant snarling lions leapt
from the undergrowth towards him.

As soon as he turned his back on the duo, three inky lions leapt from the scroll and took physical form. Sasuke immediately disengaged and withdrew a couple meters, causing Kakashi to whirl around and come face to face with three large lions in mid-pounce.

Kakashi found himself on the defensive. With his headband lowered in front of his Sharingan eye, a fact that probably irked Sasuke, he couldn’t distinguish whether Sai’s lions were real or a genjutsu.

Not that it really mattered. All they had needed was to draw Kakashi away from Sasuke. While he was busy fending off the ink animals, Sakura sprinted the short distance between her and her sensei with her right fist drawn back and ready to deliver a chakra enhanced punch.

The silver haired jounin broke away from the lions when he noticed Sakura’s approach, so she changed her target and slammed her fist into the ground not even two meters from him. The ground shattered, sending large chunks of earth flying and raising a cloud of dirt.

Sakura retreated back to her position in the shrubbery where Sai was still hidden and waited. If this worked, two ink mice would bring back the bells. If not, well it was better she was sitting out in the open. And she and Sai would have to devise a new plan.

“Congratulations, Ugly.” Sai smiled another of his fake smile and dropped a bell in her palm.

“You too, Sai.” And she smiled brightly back at him. Her eyebrow twitched. “Wait a minute. Did you just call me ugly?’’

“Yes, this book I read on human emotions and bonding said that you should give friends nicknames, and that nickname should be the opposite of what you mean.” Explained Sai.

Sakura blinked. A book he read? Did he not know how to interact with other people? To the point where he was trying to learn out of a book?

She chuckled weakly. “Well, Sai, nicknames are a great thing between friends, but try not to pick insulting ones.”

“But isn’t that the point of a nickname? It makes fun of the person being called it.”

Sakura shook her head and told Sai they should show the bells to Kakashi-sensei. The dark haired boy clearly had no idea on how to behave with other people, and he couldn’t learn it from a book. On the positive side, she got along with him reasonably well, and she now knew not to take insult to any nicknames he might call her by (‘well unless they were positive’ she thought morosely), so she would be able to help him learn how to really interact with people so that he didn’t insult half the people he talked to.

The pinkette skipped into the clearing, bell clearly visible and swinging and tinkling in her hand, Sai walking silently next to her. “We’ve got the bells Kakashi-sensei.”

Their sensei said good job and disappeared. Sakura chose to drag Sai to lunch at Ichiraku’s, thinking it best if he got used to eating there before Naruto returned, and they left behind a glowering Sasuke.

-JOUNIN-

Another two months flew by. Thankfully, Tsunade never assigned the new team D-rank missions like she would have with any new gennin team. They mostly took C-ranks outside the village
involving escort, carrier, or pick-up/drop-off type missions.

At times, Sakura found herself vexed. It was almost impossible to be the only female on a team of emotionally stunted males with varying degrees of insufferable pride. There were missions where she felt like tearing her hair out or breaking multiple ribs, often times both, by the time Konoha’s gates were within a seeing distance.

Kakashi-sensei, he repeatedly tried to get his students to not call him that but Sakura cheekily refused and Sai stuck to the basic protocol he knew for these situations so Kakashi had to endure, the majority of the time either split leadership over the mission with her, because of her status as a special jounin, or gave her complete control. She wondered if it was because he was lazy and wanted more time to read his porn or because he believed she was ready to handle the responsibility of being a team leader.

Sasuke was getting unbearable to deal with. Whenever the duties of mission leader were split between her and their sensei he only listened when Kakashi-sensei gave the orders. He grudgingly did as told when she was the sole leader, but Sakura felt that had more to do with the evil glares Kakashi sent him behind her back. The Uchiha was impossible to work with. Sakura always teamed up with Sai because he had no issues with her being in charge and didn’t interject his opinion every other word she said. Not to mention it was disastrous whenever he had to work with Sai. Sasuke seemed to take personal affront to the fact that he had a doppelganger. Sai’s nickname wasn’t well appreciated either.

For the guy who understood absolutely nothing about emotions, Sai was the easiest for her to get along with. Sakura liked to think they were a little closer than teammates (Sai said they were friends but she wasn’t sure he actually understood what a friend was.) They could have intelligent discussions; he followed her lead without question unless she forgot to address something potentially important or made some sort of error in her planning that would have consequences. When they stayed overnight at inns, she roomed with him. There had been a minor incident when he had walked in on her changing. She hadn’t noticed because his back was turned and he hadn’t said anything. So he had gotten a free show and Sakura had to explain that it wasn’t normal to watch people you weren’t intimate with getting undressed. He didn’t understand her embarrassment, but he did agree to make sure she wasn’t in the process of changing before he entered the room. She paired up with him whenever possible because they worked well together and their skills really complimented one another since she was a short range fighter and he was mid to long range.

Training with Team 7 was rougher than it had ever been when she was a gennin. Kakashi-sensei constantly had them sparring two on one, sometimes he joined in for a three against one in which case the one always lost (unless it was him), battle royales, simulation missions where something went drastically wrong, and occasionally he handed them off to Ibiki to learn how to withstand torture.

For the most part, Sakura found training enjoyable. Training to resist torture was not fun and it was one detail she never shared with her family. Ibiki made those rare sessions a nightmare and she dreaded the day they found a note waiting for them on the bridge that said report to TI, complete with a little cartoon figure of Kakashi-sensei’s face with a peace sign.

The best part was that the increased and more advanced training kept her so occupied that she totally forgot she had been avoiding her ex-boyfriend for four months until said boy showed up on her front doorstep with Hanabi for one of the girl's training sessions with Sakura.

The pink haired girl could find no words to say to the person who had broken her heart, so she silently stepped aside and let a chattering Hanabi lead them both into the Nara forest where the girl was currently working a jutsu that allowed for the animation of a tree that could be directed at her
The academy student paid no mind to the tense atmosphere around her as she continued to talk. Even after knowing the girl for a little over a year now, Sakura still thought Hanabi acted nothing like a Hyuuga, which, all things considered with the strained situation between her and Neji, was probably a good thing.

But, Hanabi’s uniqueness aside, Sakura felt awkward and uncomfortable with Neji there observing the afternoon’s lesson. She hated herself for being scared to talk to him. She had already avoided him for four months. Her fear was irrational, ridiculous, and idiotic. She shouldn’t be afraid of a conversation.

But she was. She was terrified of what Neji would say. He had finally come to talk with her. And she knew whatever he had to say would only hurt her further.

Sakura had spent the last four months furious at him for not explaining himself, and now that he was here she didn’t want to hear a word. She didn’t want conformation from his mouth that he didn’t want her. That he found someone better. A girl with less risks, less problems. She didn’t want him to say that he had ended it because he didn’t care for her.

Neji was silent until Hanabi set to work on animating the tree.

“We need to talk.” Sakura snorted.

“And you decide to do this now? After four months of not speaking to me?”

“You were avoiding me.”

“Like you couldn’t have found a way if you really wanted to. It wouldn’t have been too hard to send a message, or approach me in a public place where I would be forced to talk to you or drop by like you did today.” Sakura whispered harshly with derision.

A slightly guilty look crossed Neji’s face before he regained his usual impassiveness. “That’s true. But I needed to sort out my feelings.”

“Sort out your feelings?” she repeated. “Did you even consider my feelings when you told your family we had broken up? Did you think about how I would feel when my boyfriend stopped talking to me without explanation? When I heard second hand from your cousin about the end of our relationship? Don’t talk to me about feelings. You clearly don’t understand what I’ve had to go through these last four months.”

Neji’s sudden grip on her upper arm was punishing. “It was not my intention to break up with you.”

Sakura blinked, drained. Neji was making no sense. All she wanted was for him to finish and leave.

“Why?”

“I needed space to think. My uncle took it to mean that it meant I was having second thoughts about you.”

“Think about what?”

“Your promotion.”
She raised one pink eyebrow at him. “You distanced yourself from me because I got promoted.”

“I already told you the clan expects me to achieve jounin rank. I was annoyed. . . I felt. . . jealous,” he admitted. “You are younger than I, and from a civilian family, but you made jounin before I did.”

Sakura felt numb. So in the end it was out of her control. It wasn’t like she had taken the jounin exam, in which case Neji would have known she was aiming for a promotion. He had broken up with her because the Hokage had promoted her. A field promotion which only a Kage could give.

It was entirely out of her hand yet he had blamed her for it.

Neji was still talking. “It took me a while to realize that our ranks shouldn’t matter. It was a personal relationship, not a business one. I should have been proud of you. I am. I honestly tried to talk to you sooner, but my uncle tried to set me up with other girls within the clan. I had to reject all his proposals before he would allow me to search for a girl I liked.”

Sakura didn’t want to hear any more. Every word he spoke was an excuse. Not one word was an apology for his atrocious actions. So she slapped him.

He stared at her in shock. Hanabi, whom neither noticed had been eavesdropping on them and not working on her ninjutsu practice, gasped.

“You totally deserved that, nii-san. I heard every word. You were a terrible boyfriend to Sakura-sensei and you’re lucky she’s too nice to hit you with chakra. I would have.”

Sakura gave Hanabi a weak smile for her support. She was kind of enjoying the astonishment on Neji’s face.

“You broke up with me, Neji. Not your uncle. You could have corrected him. You should have told him that you didn’t want to break up with me. If that’s even what you wanted.” Her ex-boyfriend opened his mouth to say something but Sakura kept going. “You should have explained to me how you felt. I might think it irrational, but I would have listened to you. The Hokage is the one that decides who gets promoted when.”

Neji ducked his head shamefully at that part. “You blamed me for something that was not my decision. You came running here with your tail between your legs after four months because you wouldn’t admit you were wrong, that you were jealous. And not once have you apologized!”

The last bit was shouted at him. It irritated Sakura to no ends that he came by without warning full of excuses when he was the one in the wrong. There was no reason for him to not apologize for being completely stupid and insecure.

Except for his damn pride.

“I apologize, Sakura.”

The pinkette stamped her foot, not caring about the mini quake it caused. “I don’t want your damn apologies! I want you to mean it! I want you to be sorry! Sorry for hurting me. Sorry for breaking up with me. Sorry for letting this mess get out of hand. Sorry for letting me think that I had done something wrong. Sorry for making me think you hated me.

“I want you to say you’re sorry!” she shrieked.

“I’m sorry, okay. I’m sorry.” Neji shouted. “I am sorry.” This one was softer. “Look, Sakura, I don’t want to break up with you. If you would let me, I’d like to continue to court you.”
Said teen sighed, shaking her head tiredly. “I don’t know, Neji. Your ignoring me really hurt me. And how can I believe that your uncle won’t get between us again.”

She grasped his hands lightly in her own smaller ones. “I think it’s only fair that you give me some time to think.”

The elder Hyuuga swallowed and nodded tightly, hands clenching so hard that his knuckles turned white. Of course he should have known she wouldn’t forgive him right away. Sakura was a kind, gentle, fair, and reasonable girl, but she wasn’t a saint. Even she would find it hard to forgive his terminating their relationship, albeit indirectly by not standing up to his uncle, because he was jealous.

Neji said he understood and then left, pleading other errands to run. Sakura finally focused on her pupil. “Well, stop eavesdropping on conversations that aren’t your business and get back to work. If you don’t learn this jutsu before you leave, I’m not going to teach you what comes after the fish.”

And then Sakura laughed, genuinely laughed since the first time she had been kidnapped by the Hand of God, as Hanabi leapt to attention saluting her with a “Yes, ma’am, Sakura-sensei!” and threw herself back into the tree animation jutsu.

-JOUNIN-

Sakura had stewed for a week on her decision on whether or not to get back together with Neji.

The pink haired teen genuinely enjoyed the time she had spent with Neji, whether sparring, meditating, on a mission, or taking a nighttime stroll. Around her he let down his layered shields. He could understand the loneliness she felt from the absence of her parents, even though she now had Shikaku and Yoshino.

He was always a gentleman with her. He paid for every meal, neatly side stepping her protests each time her refused to let her split the check. He occasionally bought her something he thought she would like, like the hollowed senbon which she could fill with her own personally created poisons. He never bought her anything ridiculously expensive because she didn’t like it when Neji spent too much money on her. Never mind that such expensive items weren’t practical, and Neji was nothing if not a practical thinker.

Most importantly, he didn’t think her weak. Neji treated her as an equal, both intellectually and skill wise. He didn’t think her inferior because she was female. He knew and understood that there were some ninja skills, like genjutsu and medical jutsus, where she was naturally better than him and he didn’t begrudge Sakura her accomplishments.

Until she had been promoted to tokubetsu jounin.

He had treated her like his equal when they shared the same rank. But the second she was higher in the pecking order than he was, he threw a Hyuuga fit and didn’t talk to her for four months. FOUR MONTHS. She couldn’t stress it enough to herself because it was such a stupid thing to break up over.

And it was over between them. Sakura didn’t want a jealous boyfriend. Especially one who got upset over what rank she held. Neji had already hurt her once. She wasn’t going to give him a second chance.

-JOUNIN-
So it was a slightly melancholy Sakura that entered the Hyuuga compound that afternoon in search of her soon to be permanent ex-boyfriend. Given that the male Hyuuga was a creature of rules and habits, it wasn’t hard at all to find him. He always meditated in his room for two hours at this time.

A wave of nostalgia washed over the pinkette, who shook her head as if shaking water from her head like a wet dog would like she could get rid of those memories. This was something they used to do together. The serenity and bliss that came from sharing something as private as meditating was Sakura’s favorite pastime. She never understood how most girls preferred to be wined and dined, like the only thing that mattered was how much a guy was willing to spend on her. She would choose a quiet night in his room just listening to him breathe as they both meditated every day.

She was bidden to enter, and she did so after she steeled her heart for what was sure to be an emotional and disappointing final conversation. Well, not really final. It wasn’t like she was never going to speak to Neji again, but Sakura was positive her soon to be permanent ex-boyfriend would want to keep his distance after she broke up with him.

Matter of pride and all that rot.

“Oh Neji,” she said softly, her voice as soft as the light patter of her bare feet across the wooden floorboards of the Hyuuga compound.

As she had expected, the brunette was meditating in the center of his room. He did not open his eyes when he returned her greeting. Not that he needed to with the Byakugan activated. Neji had probably known she was here the second she had stepped inside the compound.

Sakura briefly closed her normally sparkling green eyes. She had already decided not to draw this out with pleasantries and dance around the issue.

“I’m sorry, Neji-san.”

The apology was all Neji needed to hear to know that he had lost his chance with one of the rare real girls in the village that actually cared about her job as a kunoichi and took her training as seriously as he did his own. The –san added to his name was the kunai in his heart. She had not called him with that suffix for over a year now.

He supposed he should just be grateful that she did not call him by his last name. At least by using his first, Neji knew that she hoped they could still be close. And he thought, with a little regret and surprisingly no anger, that he did not mind the thought of still being friends.

But he still wished her could call her his. But it was his fault that he could not, so Neji would have to accept Sakura’s choice.

“I understand.” Neji gave her a small smile, for he truly did.

Sakura’s face relaxed infinitesimally and he was rewarded with a small smile in return.

“Thank you.” She leaned down to graze a light kiss on his cheek. “I will always care for you.”

Then Neji watched as her pink hair flowed behind her as she walked out of his room, his life, with a straightened spine, her head held high, and with the grace kunoichi. He wished he hadn’t caused this rift between them with his irrational jealousy.

-JOUNIN-
Sakura had left the Hyuuga compound, her heart lighter than when she had entered, and sought the comfort of her brother’s arms. Shikamaru had needed to only take one look her small sad smile and the shimmering tears in her eyes before Sakura had found herself gathered into his arms.

He gently rubbed her back with one hand, the other running through her pink tresses, as he cradled her closely and whispered soothingly. He was silent as she explained, and once she had finished he had pulled her tighter against his chest and let her soak his chuunin vest with her tears.

“Did I do the right thing, Shikamaru?”

Shikamaru had never heard his sister this broken, not since her birth parents had died over a year ago, and he promised himself to find Kakashi, his father, Tsunade-sama, and Hanabi-chan so he could convince them that the Hyuuga deserved the beating of a century for hurting Sakura.

Not that he thought any of them would need much convincing. Sakura was Kakashi’s favorite student. He would deny it with his dying breath, but he had admitted to Shikamaru the first time they had hunted down Neji to warn him to treat his sister right that his female student was his favorite. And, as if being the Hokage’s apprentice wasn’t enough for Tsunade to be involved, the blonde Hokage doted on Sakura like she was the daughter she had never had. Shikamaru knew that Sakura looked at her shishou as one more mother figure in her life. He had no doubt that his father would kill Neji for hurting Sakura. The four of them had become much closer than surrogate parents and brother. They truly were her family, and as a Nara and a father of a daughter, Shikaku was duty bound to kill the boy that broke his daughter’s heart. Hanabi worshipped the ground his sister walked on and the air she breathed. The youngest Hyuuga virtually stalked Sakura whenever she was in the village, badgering her to no end about the latest jutsu Sakura had started her on or some new technique she wanted to learn. Somehow, Hanabi had come to the conclusion that Sakura was like a second Kami, and she would do anything to see that her sensei was happy.

The Nara genius didn’t say anything about his forming plans dealing with Neji, instead reassuring Sakura that she did indeed do the right thing. “Of course you did, Kura. If he’s going to be jealous that you’re better than him, he doesn’t deserve to even look at you. You’re a talented shinobi and he shouldn’t be mad that your hard work is being acknowledged. You worked your ass off to become as strong as you are.

“You deserve to be called a jounin, Sakura.” He lightly grasped her delicate chin in his hand and turned her face upwards to meet his eyes. “Do you understand, Sakura? Neji doesn’t deserve you. He certainly isn’t worth your tears. You didn’t even owe him the courtesy of letting him know you were breaking up with him. He had already made it perfectly clear he didn’t want to be near you.”

Salty tears rolled silently down her face as she tried to laugh. Shikamaru readjusted her head so that it rested on his shoulder.

“When did you get so smart?”

It came out muffled against the flesh of his left shoulder but Shikamaru had no trouble understanding her. He ruffled her pink hair, something he had started doing after seeing that she let Kakashi get away with it, “I’ve always been this smart. I’m a Nara. I was born a genius.”

Sakura giggled at his fake haughty tone and hugged him with all her unenhanced strength. It would have been really poor of her to break all his ribs after all he had done for her.

“Thank you, brother.”
A month later Sakura was sick of her team.

Tsunade-shishou may not have had Team 7 running around doing D-rank missions, which really boiled down to performing boring errands for civilians that they could not be bothered to do themselves, she had sent her team on every freaking low C-ranked mission that came through the mission request center.

The missions were ridiculously easy, not worth the jounin, special jounin, chuunin, and gennin (which she was positive Sai was not. The silent dark haired boy was too observant, too calculating, really good at creating and altering plans based on split second forewarning, moved too quietly, and was just too talented to be a gennin.)

Sakura was positive that the inconsistency between Sai’s profile and his skills was the reason her shishou assigned Team Kakashi such simple missions. Tsunade suspected an ulterior motive for Sai’s placement on their team and so did she.

But Sakura wasn’t sure that boring the team to death was the correct method to discover the real reason why he had been placed on Team 7. And quite frankly, she was going to scream if she had to go on another mission that turned into a ‘It’s Sasuke’s turn to show off his marvelous kick-ass ninja skills and complete the mission singlehandedly’ (as all these missions were turning out to be because the damn duck took every chance he could to leap without thinking so he could prove his strength. She and Sai would hang back. Sometimes he could handle it on his own, in which case his gloating grated on her ears and her nerves, or he would get his ass handed to him spectacularly, and she and Sai would smoothly step in and do what he could not, and have him glaring at their backs the journey back to Konoha.)

It wasn’t just Sasuke’s attitude. It was Kakashi’s too. She had tried to talk to her sensei, telling him that he had to bring the stupid Uchiha to heel before he got them all killed because of his lack of a function brain, and he had shrugged her off.

“Mou, mou, Sakura-chan. It’s nothing to worry about. Sasuke takes care of everything and we can relax. His work ethic leaves me with so much time to read.”

Sakura had given him an unbelievable look as he pulled out a familiar book, not orange though, it was the newest in the series and as green as everything in Konoha was, and had fallen back to her position with Sai, certain that her sensei was certifiably insane. But she would ask Inoichi-san to check.

Sai of course was no help. She had been working with him ever since he had joined their team, but she had yet to get the artist to express a genuine emotion. He stilled relied on what he had learned from his books, books that she conveniently couldn’t find and burn so he could never read them again, as a model for how he was supposed to act in situations the books had detailed. She would grant that he was at least making an effort, but he never understood what she tried to teach him, arguing that his books said differently and chose to listen to the book’s instructions as he always had.

So he still flashed a fake smile and rubbed Sasuke the wrong way, subtly insulting the Uchiha until he exploded and attempted to start a fight, which always ended in Sai thrashing Sasuke easier than Kakashi-sensei had during their first bell test, another reason why she didn’t believe the artist was a gennin.

The female Hokage flipped through pages of mission requests, glancing up occasionally as if to imagine the disaster that would occur if she gave Team 7 that mission, and then she would replace
Sakura normally thought herself to be a patient person, despite her family’s and team’s snorts that she was as patient as Gai, but if Tsunade did not decide on a mission soon, and one that was actually challenging and would at least need hers and Sai’s skills too, she was going to slam a chakra enhanced fist onto the Hokage’s desk.

“Aha!” Tsunade yelled triumphantly. “I have just the job for you four.”

A sense of foreboding ran down Sakura’s spine as her shishou smirked at Team 7. The Slug Princess in an unnaturally good mood meant bad news for whomever she was pointing that smile at.

**-JOUNIN-**

**Bounty hunting.**

The Hokage had sent a glorified gennin team out to collect a bounty on a missing nin from Kusagakure, the Village Hidden in the Grass. The shinobi had originally been slated to serve time at Hōzuki-jō, a correctional facility located on no man’s land on the coast of Kusagakure. Every village was welcome to ship off their criminals there.

Unfortunately for Kusagakure, their shinobi escaped during transport.

So the Grass Village decided the best solution was to get rid of him by placing a bounty on his head. Sakura thought they didn’t want to pay their own ninja to hunt him down and make sure he went to prison because they could have other shinobi do it for them.

It still didn’t make sense to Sakura why Tsunade had sent them on this mission. Tracking down missing nin was a problem dealt with individually by each village, unless a bounty was put on their head because then they were fair game. But, beyond that, gennin teams, since that was Team 7’s official label still, were not giving bounty hunting missions. Those missions were given to ANBU.

Sakura leapt after Sasuke, who was practically shadowing Kakashi-sensei. The Uchiha was the only one excited about this mission. It was another opportunity to prove himself superior. Missing nin weren’t the average ninja, and being able to claim to have taken one down was a massive achievement.

Kakashi-sensei, even though he was late as usual for the start of the mission, had lectured all his students about taking precaution on this mission. They were to obey his every command the second the words left his mouth. He didn’t even want a “yessir,” just immediate and absolute compliance. He said this was the most dangerous assignment they had ever dealt with; the pinkette discretely rolled her eyes, even though her sensei wasn’t privy to her ANBU fiasco mission he was a jounin and in possession of a bingo book of his own, and her, Sasuke, and Naruto had encountered Zabuza on their first mission outside the village, so the only one with inexperience with missing nins was Sai. Besides, she believed fighting a demon trumped all barring an Akatsuki member, which she fervently prayed that none made an appearance on this mission.

It turns out that Sakura should have listened to him.

She wasn’t in trouble because she had underestimated her opponent or because she had overestimated her abilities, like Sasuke had (he had received a wind jutsu to the shoulder that drilled a small hole clean through.)

Sakura was in a situation because she hadn’t been paying attention to her surroundings. While it
was normally important to be aware at all times, Team 7 had been caught by surprise by the missing nin they were tracking.

They had been crossing the Kannabi Bridge, which had been rebuilt after the Third Shinobi World War, when he had run out of the forest across the bridge. The bridge wasn’t the best place to stage a fight because a) she couldn’t shatter it without causing political trouble, b) there wasn’t space for them to coordinate a four on one fight, and c) all he had to do was get into the trees and it would take ages to find him again.

The real reason she should have been paying closer attention to her surroundings was because the missing nin was a futon user, as he had already demonstrated on Sasuke. He could easily blow all four of them off the bridge if he wished to.

And that’s exactly what happened to Sakura. She had been caught by surprise by one of his wind jutsus, and it easily flung her off her feet and over the low walls of the bridge and sent her plummeting towards a rapid current complete with jagged rocks that would rip her to shreds.

As she waited to smash into the rocks below, Sakura couldn’t help but think how aptly this bridge was named. “Bridge where the gods do not help” indeed. Sasuke was injured, Kakashi-sensei engaged with the missing nin, and Sai was too far away to help.

Her fall was stopped when she slammed into something hard. Only it wasn’t the rocks she was expecting.

She looked up at her savior and was surprised to see Sai. The emotionless boy held her tightly as he maneuvered a giant ink hawk. He set her on her feet back on the bridge and took flight again. Sakura stared at him for a few seconds, wishing he hadn’t taken off so she could thank him. She mentally shook her head. She could thank him later, when the mission was over. Right now, she snatched a kunai that sailed by her ear, they had a missing nin to bag.

From there defeating the missing nin was easy. Kakashi-sensei took offense to him throwing his favorite student off a bridge and systematically proceeded to kick his ass in thirteen seconds. Sakura had thrown her silvered hair teacher a vicious glare, demanding to know why he hadn’t done that in the first place and saved her the trouble of nearly dying, and was given a displeasing answer.

He had wanted to see if his students could handle a missing nin.

The pink haired kunoichi had ground her teeth and decided to turn her back on him to attend to Sasuke’s wound. The stupid Uchiha had tried to be stubborn about it, saying he didn’t need to be healed, then that he could have it done by a real medic when they got back to Konoha when she insisted that his wound be treated. Sakura pointedly reminded him that, as the Uchiha Clan’s personal medic, the only medic he could be seen by was her.

He had clenched his teeth, a vein popping above his right eye as he glared at her. But he couldn’t argue with her. They both knew if he came home wounded his mother would send him straight to her to be healed. After she reamed him out for refusing to be healed in the first place.

Team Kakashi fell into their standard formation on their return trip to Konohagakure, where they would hand the missing nin off and collect their payment, 12,000 ryō. Sakura let Kakashi and Sasuke pull ahead slightly, the body of the missing nin over the jounin’s shoulder.

“Thank you.”

Sai gave her a sideways glance. “What for, Ugly?”
“Saving me.” She didn’t bat an eyelash at his offensive nickname for her.

“That is what teammates do, is it not?” He turned his head to face her, and his piercing black eyes stared intently at her. “Is that not what you said our first day as a team? That we had a responsibility to look after the other members of our team and offer support when it was needed? You needed help, so I caught you.”

Sakura smiled gently. “Yes, that’s right. But you always deserve a thank you for helping someone else.”

He tilted his head sideways, considering her words. This was a scenario he had not read about in his books, so he would trust her word.

“You’re welcome.”

Kakashi-sensei ruined the moment by telling them to get a move on, but Sakura couldn’t keep the smile off her face.

Sai had saved her life. And he had done it because she said it was important to look after your teammates. It looked like she was making some progress after all.

Sakura just hoped the next time she had a break through it wouldn’t be because she nearly died.

-JOUNIN-

Sakura, upon learning that Sai had no ability in the kitchen and lived off of quick fix meals that only required he boil water, the one thing he could do without blowing up his kitchen, she had demanded the artist come to her house and let her cook him dinner. He had tried to refuse, but she insisted she owed him something for saving her life and warned him if he didn’t let her do this for him she would stalk him like she used to stalk Sasuke.

Apparently, her fangirl ways were well known by Sai, for he had caved like wet paper bombs seconds later, promising to come for dinner that night.

Sakura had gone home, announced she had a guest coming for dinner, and promptly shoved her mother out of the kitchen. The three Naras standing on the other side of the door glanced amusedly at the door, but decided to let the pinkette be.

A knock sounded and the petal haired girl shunshined to the door before Yoshino could. She stepped aside, letting her teammate enter, and showed him into the dining room. She forced him into the empty chair next to hers and dashed back to the kitchen, returning in time to hear her mother comment on Sai’s status as her boyfriend.

“Are you Sakura-chan’s new boyfriend, Sai-kun?” Sakura nearly dropped her plate of momen tofu, Sai’s favorite.

He tilted his head like he always did when he was considering something related to feelings. “Yes, I am.”

Sakura gripped the door with white knuckles as Yoshino clapped her hands and squealed, saying how pleased she was that she had a boyfriend again because she wanted grandchildren. Shikaku still slouched, but his eyes were as watchful as ever, and her brother had actually straightened his spine and was glaring darkly at her newest teammate, who was still wearing a fake smile.

“Sai’s not my boyfriend.” She said firmly.
Yoshino frowned. Sai turned to face her, a confused smile replacing his fake one. Sakura didn’t like it any better than the fake one.

“Yes I am.”

The pinkette narrowed her eyes at him, trying to discern if he was being deliberately obtuse or if he actually didn’t know the connotation to the terms boyfriend and girlfriend.

“No, you’re not.”

“Why not? If you are my girlfriend, doesn’t that make me your boyfriend?”

“It doesn’t work like that. You didn’t ask me out.” Sakura could not believe she was having this conversation in front of her family.

“I have to ask you out for you to be my girlfriend?”

“Yes. And I’d have to say yes.”

“I see.”

Somehow, she doubted that.

“Will you be my girlfriend?”

Shikamaru spit out the tea he had just drunk and opened his mouth to say something, but Sakura spoke first.

“No.”

Sai blinked. “Why won’t you be my girlfriend? Did I not ask right?”

“Yes, you asked right, but no, I won’t be your girlfriend. There’s a difference between a girlfriend and a girl friend,” the pinkette explained, emphasizing a pause between girl and friend the second time so he would understand that it was two separate words.

“How so?”

“A girlfriend is a label applied to a girl who is dating. A girl friend is a friend that is female. I’m the second one.”

“So you are my friend that is a girl.”

“Yes.”

“That makes you my girlfriend.”

“No, Sai. We would have to be dating for that.”

“I asked you to be my girlfriend.”

“You have to take a girl on a date first. Then you ask her to be your girlfriend.”

“I understand.”

Sakura doubted that too.
“Will you go on a date with me tomorrow?”

Sakura sighed heavily. This conversation was going in circles. Sai seemed to be stuck on the fact that he had asked like she had told him he had to but was confused as to why she was responding in the negative. She decided it would be best to give in now and try again to explain herself tomorrow, when she didn’t have an audience.

Besides, it was Sai. With him being as emotionally stunted as he was it probably wouldn’t be a date to gush about, and she could gently reject him by saying that she didn’t think they would be good together because they weren’t compatible or something else that he would likely read in a guide to relationships book.

“Fine. Pick me up at six.”

She pointed ignored Yoshino’s all too pleased expression, Shikamaru’s gob smacked one, and Shikaku’s more observant one in favor of collecting the rest of dinner. She was positive about one thing, Sakura thought as she finally took her seat, now regretting that she had chosen to place Sai next to her, she was never inviting her emotionless teammate home again.

-JOUNIN-

Sakura watched his retreating back, her right hand pressed to her lips.

‘Well,” she thought wryly, ‘he definitely did his research.”

The night had not met her expectations at all.

-JOUNIN-

Sakura dressed in a simple green dressed layered with see through black material that made the dress appear to be a darker shade of green. It had a diagonal hemline, going from her left thigh to her right knee, and according to her mother really brought out her eyes.

Sai had arrived fifteen minutes early, a bouquet of amaryllis, thistle, edelweiss, and orchids. It looked beautiful, smelled heavenly, and she was sure he had asked Ino’s mom for helping picking them based on their meanings. Radiant beauty and pride, independence, daring and courage, and his wanting to make a long lasting impression.

What she had loved most was that there were no sakura blossoms among them. They weren’t automatically her favorite flower because she was named after them. It was something Neji hadn’t understood when he bothered to get her flowers.

He had waited patiently while Yoshino applied some light make up that she promised would have Sai unable to look away from her. She almost thought she could hear Shikamaru and his father giving Sai the third degree, but dismissed that idea as fanciful because it would be too much work for the Nara men.

Sai was speechless when she finally saw him. She didn’t know if it was because of her or because he was naturally quiet, but she liked to believe that he was stunned to see her all dressed up. He was dressed simply as well, in black slacks, and a long sleeved button down black shirt, one that actually covered his abdomen. He took two steps forward, reaching for her right hand, which he brought up to his lips and gently brushed against her knuckles.

Sakura didn’t need to hear Yoshino’s giggling to know that she was flushed as red as a tomato. Given Sai’s natural tendency to bluntly say whatever came to mind, she was pleasantly surprised by the overwhelming manners he possessed. And she quite enjoyed being lavished. Neji had been
polite, but this was different, somehow.

He grasped her left hand in his right and led her out the door, after swearing to Shikaku to have her home by ten.

Sakura didn’t know what he had planned for the evening, but she was content to follow wherever Sai might lead her tonight.

She was impressed when he brought her to a reasonably priced restaurant that served her favorite umeboshi, and then took her to see the new Princess Gale movie she had mentioned she wanted to see weeks ago. He refused to let her pay for either.

The pair had chatted lightly over dinner. Sakura realized that Sai wasn’t as lost as she had assumed when it came to dealing with emotions. He knew what most of them wore and understood them to a point, but hadn’t actually experienced them himself. But if the first half of their date was any indication, Sai only needed to understand the emotions and know that he would feel them personally in time and then he would really understand each one.

The movie was a great as the reviews promised, and Sai had held her hand throughout the entire film.

 Darkness had fallen when they exited the theatre, still hand in hand, and Sakura felt a rush of disappointment at the thought that her date was over. She hadn’t known what to expect, but it definitely wasn’t much, but she had gotten such a wonderful evening.

However, Sai didn’t lead her down the street that led to the Nara compound at the eastern edge of the village. Instead he took her to a sakura field. The flowers where in bloom and he sat her down at the base of a sakura tree. The starts twinkled in the sky and Sakura had never felt more relaxed and peaceful.

She rested her head on Sai’s shoulder. A cherry blossom floated down to land in her lap. Sai picked it up gently and fixed it in her hair.

“I know you don’t like sakura blossoms.”

Sakura stared at him, startled. She had never said anything about her dislike for her namesake. “I think you should embrace them. They represent you perfectly. Education, feminine beauty, appreciation of life. They symbolize that short lives shinobi lead, but there are lives so full of life.”

The pinkette’s mouth formed a small ‘o’. Sai seemed to have an inner poet in him, but she had understood what he was saying. Sakura blossoms bloomed for a short time, but they were so beautiful and fragile and bursting with life, and they bloomed every year.

Sakura clung to him as he pulled her to her feet and walked her home, her mind too busy thinking about how wrong her every misconception about this date turned out. What amazed her most was his way with words that she didn’t know he had. Sai had so easily convinced her to love the flower she was named for, so effortlessly. He made her appreciate herself and see her as he saw her.

A strong, smart, independent, beautiful woman capable of making her own choices and taking her own risks. It was so refreshing after so long of being treated as fragile, both when her parents died and when Neji had left her without explanation. She was capable of taking care of herself, and even though Kakashi-sensei always made her stay back if he could, he knew that she could handle herself in a fight, both physically and mentally.

Sai had only known her for three months, but he appreciated her more than her team, that had
known her for two years, did.

He walked her straight to her door and turned around.

“Where are you going? You’re supposed to kiss the girl goodnight.” She called to him.

Sai slowly returned to the porch, pressing one pale hand to her cheek hesitantly. “I am?”

Sakura nodded.

“Alright.” The hand moved to curl its fingers in her hand and pull her head back. Sai’s lips on hers were as gentle and soft as all his other motions had been all evening, and Sakura had had enough of being treated like she was a glass doll.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and dug her fingers into his ebony hair, pulling his head down and forcing him to kiss her more fiercely.

After what seemed like eternity they broke apart, both panting heavily. Sai gave her a smile. A true one.

The he strolled out the compound’s gates without looking back, leaving Sakura to stare after him until they closed behind him, one hand pressed to her lips like she could hold onto the spark she felt when they had kissed just by touching where he had kissed her.

She flounced inside with the dreamiest smile on her face, one that didn’t go unnoticed by her family.

That had been the best date she had been on.

And she was quite looking forward to another one.

-JOUNIN-

Her happiness eviscerated the next day.

Sai had apparently been busy last night while she laid in bed dreaming about him.

He had informed the Godaime Hokage that he was dating her surrogate daughter, as well as Teuchi and Ayame from the ramen stand they frequented for lunch, the staff at the hospital for reasons she couldn’t fathom, and half of the Konoha twelve.

And it was only eight in the morning.

Lucky for both of them they had been called in to the Hokage’s office to collect their pay for their mission and a percentage of the bounty, because it meant that she couldn’t kill him.

Tsunade, however, wanted all the details, and wanted them now, while she had Sakura in her clutches. The blonde didn’t care whatsoever that the other two members of Team 7 were present and she demanded that the pinkette tell her everything.

Sakura started at the end of the story.

“Baka!” She slapped Sai in the back of the head. Everyone in the office stared at her in disbelief.

“Baka?”

“Yes, baka. You can’t run around telling everyone we’re dating when we’re not.”
Confusion and hurt shone in Sai’s black eyes. “We are not? I took you on a date last night.”

“Yes. Remember what I told you at dinner.”

Sakura waited patiently for him to review the conversation, knowing that he had realized what he had forgotten when he blinked and the uncertainty was replaced with, if she thought he recognized it, glee.

“Sakura, will you be my girlfriend?”

Sai’s question had sufficiently shocked the other three people in the room. Sasuke because he couldn’t believe that the social recluse was asking Sakura to date him; Kakashi because he wasn’t aware that Sai was capable of genuine smiles; and Tsunade because one, she thought this conversation had occurred last night, and two, because she was sure that this relationship was going to through a huge sword in Danzou’s plans.

-JOUNIN-

Under normal circumstances, relationships between team members were forbidden. It resulted in the team being disbanded or one of the involved being relocated to a different cell.

However, Team 7 was not a normal team and these were not normal circumstances. They weren’t really a gennin team, and they definitely were not an ANBU team, so their team wasn’t set in stone and could be changed, and since Sai was a replacement for Naruto, he wasn’t really a part of the team, so Sakura and Sai figured they would be fine.

Things turned out better than fine. For his own reasons, Danzou had argued, when the relationship had been brought to the Council’s attention, that the two be left alone.

It made Sakura suspicious of him. Danzou believed in a militaristic Konoha, rigidly controlled by heavily reinforced rules with recompense for the smallest of misconduct. Being romantically involve was high up on the list of forbidden things, just a couple places below treason. So for him to support her and Sai meant that he expected to get something out of their relationship.

But Sakura didn’t know what. And his agenda didn’t become any clearer as time passed.

By no means was her relationship with Sai easy. It was a great deal harder than the one she had shared with Neji, but that fact made her feel like what she had with Sai was more real. They had to work to be together. Not just because of busy schedules, which had been most of the problem when she was with Neji, but also with their own issues.

The artist was obviously still learning to feel and understand different emotions. He was still blunt. He had trouble distinguishing between a true statement and a rude one. And often times, they were really just a statement on what he had observed, but because of his lack of social abilities, it came across as totally offensive.

Sakura had a slight issue with abandonment. She clung to Sai like a paper bomb afraid that if she let go he would decide to walk away like Neji did without explanation. Her boyfriend actually like that she was at his sides at all times. He thought it odd that she thought he would leave (“We are on the same team and we are dating. Where would I go?” She kissed him hard for that and made an effort to be a little less clingy.) She was also impatient and prone to raging tempers and a little too happy to throw around punches filled with chakra. She was also careful with what she told her boyfriend. It wasn’t coincidence that Danzou put Sai on her team.

But they worked.
It was easy to go out on dates when they were on the same team. Sai sent her flowers once a week, usually to her office at the hospital where medics and nurses cooed over them and remarked on how sweet her boyfriend was.

Sakura went to his apartment once. It contained the barest of furniture needed to live there. Sai had shown her some of his other paintings. Sakura had thought they were all wonderfully, amazed at the talent Sai possessed with a brush. He drew such breathtaking scenery.

The one thing that confused her was the lack of titles. Not one of his paintings was named. So she asked why.

"I've drawn hundreds, maybe thousands of pictures so far… other pictures have the situation at the time, and the artist's feelings… like portraits have the person's name… but don't pictures usually have titles…? To be more precise, even if I try to give them titles, I just can't do it. I don't feel anything… they don't put me in mind of anything."

“What about now?” She had spent months teaching him to feel. Surely one of his more recent pictures would have a title.

Sai seemed to hesitate before he went into his studio and came back out with a canvas in his hands. Sakura let out a small “Ooh” of pleasure when she saw it. It was just like the night of their first date. A cherry blossom tree in full bloom sat on the embankment of a gorgeous lake. Stars shined as little dots of white and yellow against a pitch black sky, reflecting off the surface of the calm lake. Cherry blossoms floated on a slight breeze that was lightly swaying the branches of the sakura tree. Sakura thought it was perfect, it depicted both her and Sai in the sakura tree and the quiet, strong background even though neither one was physically drawn in the picture.

“This one makes me feel. I want this one to have a title, but I do not know what.” He admitted.

Sakura studied the picture for a minute more. “What did you feel when you were drawing this?”

“I do not know. I wanted to capture a piece of that night. I wanted to show you that you can be delicate and strong.” Sakura nearly cried. It was times like these where she believed he must have been lying about not being able to feel emotions, but then he would turn around and say something stupid and it would only be a memory.

She laid a hand on his shoulder. “Maybe this piece doesn’t need a name. You painted it. You know what it means to you. And that should be enough.”

“Thank you, Ugly.” There he went again, ruining the moment with his rude nicknames. Sai was lucky she already knew that he meant to say that she was beautiful, because he would have never gotten a girlfriend otherwise. “You can have it. Maybe you’ll be able to give it a name.”

Sakura had immediately hung it on the wall across from her bed. Yoshino had commented how lovely it was and how sweet she thought it was that her boyfriend was painting pictures for her. She had also offered a few suggestions for names, but Sakura let the picture remain unnamed so far.

It seemed appropriate; this one picture didn’t need a title to explain itself. So much more could be said from the colors and the strokes than a word could ever convey. And it really defined their unusual relationship, which was all that truly mattered to Sakura.

-JOUNIN-

Hanabi’s visits became more frequent as winter approached. Her academy teacher had informed...
her that, come spring, she’d be eligible to take the graduation exam early. The young Hyuuga had jumped at the opportunity, literally leaping over her sensei’s desk to hug him, and ran straight to her to give Sakura the good news.

The rosette was thankful that she had been promoted to tokubetsu jounin in April, otherwise she would not have the required year as a jounin under her belt.

Then again, if that were the case, it was very likely that Hanabi would decline the chance to become a gennin a year early if staying with her year group meant Sakura would be her sensei. Hanabi was awfully stubborn that way.

So Hiashi’s second daughter became a frequent visitor to the Nara compound. If not for the fact that Sakura walked Hanabi home every night after dinner, which she had started to help with after she demanded Sakura teach her to cook, the pink haired teen would have sworn Hanabi intended to move in. At times, like when she had woken to find the youngest Hyuuga curled at the foot of her bed like a cat, Sakura had thought Hanabi had become a permanent member of the Nara household.

The young Hyuuga was learning quickly, and between teaching her and her shifts at the hospital, Sakura rarely got to see her boyfriend. Luckily, Sai didn’t care about the lack of time they spent together, especially since the couple still paired up together on missions. Sakura thought it was more because he watched her from afar every day.

Before she knew it, Christmas and the New Year had come and gone, flowing quickly into February and then to March.

Had Yoshino not asked her what she planned to do for her birthday, Sakura would have probably forgotten about it all together in the chaos that had become her life for the last four months.

“Huh?” was her smart answer.

“Your birthday. It’s in two weeks, Sakura-chan. What would you like to do for it?”

“I . . uh . . . a family dinner, I guess.” Shikamaru’s mother smiled.

“That’s good. We had planned for one last year.” Neither woman spoke. There was nothing to be said about her fourteenth birthday. They both knew where she had been and why Sakura had been unable to celebrate. Sakura still hated thinking about the Hand of God. Occasionally, she would wake from a nightmare screaming, and either her mother or her brother would hold her, stroke her hair, and rock her back to sleep. They weren’t as often as they had been her first month back, but they still happened.

“And maybe Hanabi could come too.” After the nearly two years she had known the unique Hyuuga, Sakura had come to think of her as a little sister. She thought that even Shikamaru was starting to see the girl as his sister, and he was always complaining the girls were troublesome.

Yoshino gave her a surprised look. “Oh, didn’t you know? Hanabi-chan’s birthday is the day before yours. She helped plan the double birthday party for the two of you last year.” The older woman smiled wistfully. “She was so ecstatic when she found out you two were only a day apart.”

Sakura blinked. He definitely had not known that, but she could see why Hanabi would be so excited about that. The Hyuuga was weird like that. She wanted to be as close to Sakura as possible, often times mimicking her movements and memorizing her likes and dislikes in effort to connect with her mentor, and the knowledge that she was born a day before Sakura would have
Hanabi as happy as Naruto when he tricked someone into paying for his ramen. How much closer could you get to a person? Aside from sharing a birthday.

Another thing for Sakura to look forward to was Naruto’s return. He was nearing close to two years out of the village with the Toad Sannin. It had seemed like such a long time for him to be gone, and she was looking forward to the noise and overall chaos that would follow him back home. Another six months didn’t seem like too long a period to wait, especially since she was going to be busy with a gennin team in two months.

Being responsible for a bunch of rascals would certainly keep her on her toes until her blonde and emotional teammate returned.

Sakura celebrated her fifteenth birthday with her family and friends. It was a joint party with Hanabi, who turned eleven. Although it was Hanabi’s second party in as many days, she admitted she preferred the Naras’ idea of a party better than the one the Hyuuga elders dictated she had. Apparently her little protégé wasn’t a big fan of tradition. Who knew?

Most of her presents were scrolls for elemental ninjutsu and a couple higher level genjutsus she had wanted to study. Shizune had gifted her with a personalized medic’s pouch that was her second favorite gift. Her favorite present was from her parents and Shikamaru. The three of them had decided to give her a group present; a brand new axe. Only this axe stood as tall as she did and its blade was twice her width. It was nicely completely with the pink ribbon wrapped around the handle.

She would have to find a way to get Tenten to teach her how to use this monstrous weapon. Sakura had yet to return to afternoon training with Team Gai, and honestly she didn’t think she ever would, but it certainly made approaching the bun haired girl difficult. And that was even counting the fact that she was on “Neji’s side.” It was really stupid because Neji had admitted he was in the wrong and Sakura had every right to leave him and not give him second chance, but his teammate placed all the blame on her and refused to talk to her, so Sakura would have to find another weapons specialist.

-JOUNIN-

June brought the sweltering heat the Land of Fire was aptly named for. Sakura was glad she wore a green tank top with the Haruno and Nara clan symbols on them, her spandex short, and the slit white medic skirt. She wondered how Sai and Sasuke could bear to wear black, even if her boyfriend’s shirt showed off his midriff.

The pinkette was grateful for the air conditioning inside the Hokage’s tower, which is where she was headed. She strolled through Konoha just before noon with a bounce in her step. Today was the day jounin instructors received their teams, and she could not wait to officially be Hanabi’s teacher, as she had promised herself when the girl had first addressed her as Sakura-sensei. She was also anxious to meet the other gennin she would be responsible for.

Speaking of gennin teams, Danzou and Tsunade-shishou had gotten into a really loud argument (Sakura called it a screaming match) over her position as a jounin sensei. Whatever the man’s plans were, Sakura was clearly involved in some manner because he did not want her off Team 7 version 2. Tsunade had shot him down rather spectacularly by pointing out that Hiashi Hyuuga, a clan head and Council member, had specifically request that Sakura be his second daughter’s team leader.

Sakura had joined the Hokage after Danzou had stalked out of the blonde’s office, inquiring if Lord Hiashi had really requested she be Hanabi’s sensei.
“Kami, no. But Danzou doesn’t need to know that. These teams have been carefully structured, including their overall balance and their sensei. Under the right circumstances, teams can be switched last minute or a jounin instructor could be replaced, but there was no way I was letting that bastard mess with my team assignments because of his hidden plans. Technically, he was not authority to dictate which of my shinobi can be senseis, so it was rather pointless for him to try and demand I keep you on Team 7.”

Sakura couldn’t find it in herself to care that her shishou had just lied to a politically powerful and venerable Council member.

The pink haired teen crowed into the Godaime’s office with at least twenty other jounin. One look around was all that was needed for Sakura to see that she wasn’t the youngest candidate there. Normally, that wasn’t a good thing, because it meant you were assigned the last team, the one that wasn’t picked. Luckily for Sakura, she was the Hokage’s apprentice, which gave her as much standing as a jounin of three years, and Tsunade was on her side. She was the one that pushed to make sure that Sakura got Hanabi on her team.

This year’s graduating class was significantly larger than her own, having 17 teams of gennins. Sakura was on the receiving end of numerous calculating and speculative looks, being the only ninja in the room under the age of twenty, and more surprised glances when she was named as the sensei of Team 3, the only team with a gennin that took the graduation exams early.

She actually thought the majority of them were either put out or angry with her for getting the second Hyuuga prodigy when she was only fifteen.

The gathering of jounins was dismissed.

“Except you, Sakura.”

Sakura lifted one pink eyebrow and looked quizzically at her shishou.

Tsunade waited until all the other shinobi had vacated her office before speaking. “There was a slight complication in designing the teams this year.”

‘A complication?’ her mind echoed. “What kind of complication?”

“Due to Hanabi taking the graduation exam a year early, there are 52 gennins this year.” Sakura could do the math easily. That meant that Hanabi was the odd gennin out.

“So does Team 3 only consist of Hanabi?” she asked confused.

“No,” Tsunade laughed. She sobered quickly though. “It means Hanabi had to be added to an already decided team of three.”

Understanding shone in Sakura’s green eyes. “So I have a team of four.”

Her shishou nodded. “Yes. Team 3 consists of Hanabi Hyuuga, Konohamaru Sarutobi, Moegi, and Udon.”

Sakura blinked. She had not be expected to be given the team of gennin that idolized Naruto. She took the personal files she was presented with and shunshined over rooftops to the academy. She was slightly irked that she would be the last jounin sensei to arrive. It reminded Sakura of when she was waiting for Kakashi-sensei to arrive.

She loved Kakashi-sensei. He was a great sensei after he kicked his ass into gear during their mission to the Land of Waves. But he was lazy, laid back, always late, carried his porn with him
at all times, spent more time reading that stupid book than he teaching them. She intended to be a real sensei from the start. She would teach her gennin how to be ninja, to follow their own ninja way. She wouldn’t play favorites. She would focus on each of their strengths and weaknesses. Turn them into a team that could not be beat.

Sakura had debated long and hard, but she had decided to use Kakashi-sensei’s bell test as her own. It wasn’t exactly the same test, aside from the fact that she couldn’t use two bells against four gennins. And while she didn’t know everything, Hanabi did know that Sakura’s own gennin test was based on teamwork, so it wouldn’t be hard for her to draw the right conclusion when presented with fewer bells than there were people.

She lid open the wooden door to the classroom, reflexively checking for a chalkboard eraser above her head. Naruto was Konohamaru’s hero in more than one way.

“Sakura?”

“Sakura-sensei!”

The rosette’s eldest three gennin stared shocked at Hanabi when the Hyuuga literally threw herself a Sakura.

“You really are my sensei! This is so great!”

“Alright,” Sakura cut across Hanabi’s babble of how she never doubted that Sakura would be her sensei, “Team 3, we’re meeting on the rooftops. You have one minute.” She laughed internally, as she jumped out the window and walked up the side of the academy, listening to the four gennin scramble and dash through the school.

Sakura observed her students as they gasped and tried to draw more breathe into their lungs. Hanabi was on the right, her newly acquired headband proudly displayed atop her head, very similar to Sakura’s own.

She paid particular attention to her three new gennins. Udon was leaning against the rail next to Hanabi, a drip of snot hanging from his nose. With short brown hair and glasses, he was the nerd of the team. He had the brains. His file mentioned his love of math. Sakura predicted he would be a great strategist.

Moegi was next. She had orange hair tied up and back, with her forehead protector on her forehead. She wore a purple sleeveless vest of a violet shirt paired with a beige layered skirt and mid-thigh boots. Moegi was enthusiastic and determined, but didn’t possess any one area that she really excelled in. Sakura would have to correct that.

Lastly was Konohamaru. It was almost like Naruto had never left the village. Had he had blonde hair instead of his short brown spikey locks, she would have sworn it was Naruto. He was just as loud as her teammate, and from the rumors she heard, shared his fascination with that ridiculous sexy jutsu that Naruto had created. He now wore a pale green jacket and brown pants, his long blue scarf still trailing on the ground.

Sakura clapped her hands once and all four gennin immediately focused on her. “Good. Now I want you to introduce yourselves. I want a name, which areas your good and not so good at, hobbies, and your dream. I’ll go first.

“My name is Sakura Haruno Nara. I was adopted by Shikaku and Yoshino Nara, but you will call me Sakura-sensei. My specialties are medical ninjutsu, genjutsu, and earth and water ninjutsu. My taijutsu’s not the strongest.” She ignored the fake coughs from Hanabi that she used to hide the
muttered “super strength.”

“I enjoy meditating, working at the hospital, and training. My dream is to surpass Tsunade-shishou as a medic. Your turn, Konohamaru-kun.”

“My name’s Konohamaru! I’m use fire based ninjutsu, although not very well.” He seemed a little put out at himself for having to admit that. But he perked up at his next sentence. “But I am awesome at Naruto-nii-san’s Sexy Jutsu. I’m going to be Hokage after him.”

Sakura’s eye twitched. She promised herself the first thing she would do after giving Naruto a rib shattering hug when he returned would be to punch him across Konoha. Why was he teaching that stupid, useless, perverted jutsu to academy students?

She pointed at Moegi next. “Well, I’m Moegi, the sassiest kunoichi in the academy.” Was she still promoting that? “I’m really good at memorizing and my aim is terrible. I want to be just like you Sakura-sensei!”

Hanabi targeted the older female with a dark glower as Moegi looked at Sakura with shining eyes. She could just see the tension between them now. It was almost like she was twelve again and Naruto and Sasuke were trying to one up each other. Sakura felt sympathy for Kakashi for having to put up with the two of them, but she felt infinitely worse for her. Two guys competing would just beat the crap out of each other and shrug off the injuries and be friends at the end of the spar. Females, though, were a nightmare. With all the sniping, PMSing, legendary grudges females were famous for holding, and the natural competitiveness that came with being female, Hanabi and Moegi would be trying to stomp the other girl six feet under.

“Moving along, Udon?”

“Udon. I like math and want to be as cool as Sasuke-san.”

It was the shortest introduction, and it caused Sakura some serious worry. If Udon’s greatest ambition was to grow up like Sasuke her life took a downturn for the worse. She could not imagine anyone wanting to be like Sasuke and would do everything she could to convince Udon that the broody Uchiha was not a role model he should aspire to be. Naruto, childish as he seemed, was better than Sasuke, and these kids already worshiped the blonde. They had referred to him as Boss when she first met them before her chuunin exams, so it hopefully wouldn’t be too hard to help Udon see that he should be more like Naruto.

“My name is Hanabi Hyuuga, second daughter of Lord Hiashi Hyuuga. I have been training with Sakura-sensei for two years. My skills are earth ninjutsu, Hyuuga style ninjutsu, and basic healing. I refuse to have a weakness. I train until I am perfect. I will be Sakura-sensei’s apprentice.”

Of course Hanabi would deliver her introduction as the Hyuuga heir she was. Sakura was a little taken aback by it, because she had seen the more inquisitive, open, and easily distracted side of Hanabi, but she supposed the girl was nervous. She was a year younger than her teammates. Or she could have been jealous of Moegi and decided to brag about how she was closer to Sakura. The pinkette thought the second theory was more likely.

Another look at her gennin gave Sakura second thoughts about being a jounin sensei. Now it was Moegi that was glaring at Hanabi. She hadn’t even had the team for ten minutes and already they were picking fights. Konohamaru was staring at Hanabi in awe and Udon’s careless silence scarcely reminded her of Sasuke. She wondered how the Copy-Cat nin had survived her team.

“Oh alright, Team 3, you have your first assignment today.”
Sakura ignored the startled exclamations of ‘already?’ and explained their first task. She held two silver bells in one gloved hand. Kakashi-sensei never did take them back after their second test, so she kept them as a memento. Now they would be put to good use. “I have, here, two bells. It’s your job to get them from me in any way you can. There’s no time limit.”

“But Sakura-sensei, there’s only two bells and four of us.” Moegi pointed out.

“Yes. That means that only two of you will get the bells. The two who fail to get a bell will be sent back to the academy.” The four gennin gasped. “Of course, it could be that none of you get a bell and you’ll all be sent back.”

Sakura shrugged her shoulders, like she didn’t care whether or not her team would pass this test.

“That’s not fair! We passed the graduation exam. How can you send us back? We’re gennin!”

“Sorry Konohamaru, but the graduation exam is just to see if you know enough to be a gennin. This is the real test. If you fail this you have to redo the last year.”

All four of her gennins were giving her mutinous looks.

“Oh, one more thing.”

Sakura paused to make them anxious, thinking this was probably the only reason her own sensei had put up with them. It was fun to torment gennin. And so easy.

“You have to hold onto the bells once you’ve got them.”

-JOUNIN-

Sakura relaxed atop the stone depiction of the Fourth Hokage. She briefly contemplated taking a nap, assured that her little gennins would not find her for a couple of hours. The Hokage Mountain was a rather large and iconic hiding place, but that meant it wouldn’t be the first place her team thought to look.

And she was right. Surprisingly, it was not Hanabi with her Byakugan eyes capable of seeing 360 degrees that found her, but Konohamaru.

She stared up at his glaring face from her prone position lying on the Yondaime’s head. “How did you find me?” Sakura really was curious. She honestly thought Hanabi’s kekkei genkai would enable the younger gennin to find her first.

The third Hokage’s grandson’s mask of anger slipped, sheepishness taking its place. He actually shuffled his feet as he explained. “Well, I got tired of running around the village looking for you. You have pink hair for Kami’s sake! You shouldn’t have been so hard to find. I got fed up and decided to take the high ground.”

He pointed a finger between her eyes. “But you’ve been hiding up here the whole time! Sleeping!”

Sakura shrugged off Konohamaru’s accusations as she stood and stretched. “You guys were taking longer than I thought, so I took a nap.”

“Whatever. I’m going to beat you and take that bell.”

The pinkette smirked.
Unfortunately for Konohamaru, the boy wasn’t much of a challenge, not really a challenge at all really. He didn’t get anywhere near the bells on her waist and was sent free falling off the Yondaime with a flick off her pointer finger.

Sakura relocated to Ichiraku’s. It was approaching noon and she wasn’t going to skip lunch so she could play hide and go chase with her team. Her lunch was quick and quiet and she decided her next stop was the hospital. She just couldn’t help but imagine her gennins’ faces when she told them she was working at the hospital while they were running around the village trying to find her.

She did wonder what Hanabi was up to. Finding Sakura should have been simple for her, so it was rather odd that the pink haired teen hadn’t seen her yet. It was possible that Hanabi could have figured out that the true purpose of this test was to see how well they could use the skills their teammates had.

Sakura didn’t think that was the case though. Hanabi was just as prideful as every other Hyuuga even if she often didn’t act like it around Sakura. She wouldn’t ask for help until it became obvious that she could not accomplish this on her own. Then she would have to convince the rest of Team 3 to help, which would be a task in and of itself because of the rivalry that spark between Hanabi and Moegi. Neither girl would willingly work with the other.

Hanabi was the second one to find her. Nurses didn’t stop the Hyuuga as she strolled through the halls of the hospital. She had shadowed Sakura many, many times on her rounds, and it went unspoken that Hanabi was allowed entrance to areas of the hospital that was normally restricted to medics and nurses.

Hanabi found her mending the fractured tibia of a chuunin that had managed to step into a gopher hole. She waited patiently for her sensei to finish and release the boy with a warning to rest that leg and not train, do heavy lifting, or anything else strenuous for the next two days.

“I only need to close one tenketsu.”

“That’s true. If you could hit it. But I happen to be excellent at dodging.” Hanabi frowned. That was certainly true. She often times had trouble landing hits on Sakura when the two sparred.

“Besides, would you really start a fight in a hospital?”

Once it was obvious that Sakura was not leaving the safety of the hospital, Hanabi left. Sakura didn’t actually stay after the girl had left. But she was sure that Hanabi would get on the right track soon.

She passed Udon and Moegi, those two had apparently gotten the memo. They were both easily dealt with and didn’t get near the bells, but they were working as a team. The same could not be said of the other two members of Team 3.

Konohamaru tried again, still working on his own. He tried again, and again, and again. He came back for a sixth, a seventh, an eighth, and a ninth try. Sakura admired his guts and persistence, although it was starting to come off more as stubbornness as his tries hit double digits. She didn’t think he would ever get the hint and realize he was supposed to be working with Moegi, Udon, and Hanabi.

But, apparently small miracles do happen, because the next time she saw Konohamaru it was in
the presence of Hanabi. Neither one managed to grab a bell, but they were making progress.

-JOUNIN-

The sun crawled across the sky. It was starting to fall behind the walls to the west of the village. She had seen neither hide nor tail of her gennins since she had sent poor Udon and Moegi flying towards the academy three hours ago.

She had initially said that there was no time limit. But that was only because she thought they would have divined the true meaning of this test by now. However, Team 3 had not made one group effort.

‘That’s okay. I wanted to pull a Kakashi on them.’

Sakura chuckled to herself. When she had first taken this test, she had really believed that Kakashi-sensei was going to ship all three of them back to the academy. After Kakashi had explained his test, she thought she still deserved to be sent back. She had never once thought of helping Naruto. He was her teammate too, but she had only wanted to find Sasuke. Sakura didn’t plan on giving Naruto her lunch either. She had only feed him because Sasuke was going to.

She had felt so guilty, as she laid in bed that night pondering over her lack of abilities and her teammates’ better than normal prowess. She had become a ninja for the wrong reasons. Naruto did it for respect he should have had, as the Jinchuuriki of the Kyuubi. She was a kunoichi because she wanted to be noticed by Sasuke.

That had all changed. The little pink haired girl pretending to be a kunoichi had matured. Sakura had trained extensively, day in and day out, bettering her skills. She left behind the fangirl more obsessed with boys and clothes and paid more attention to learning new and stronger techniques. She had grown up, climbed up the ranks, and now had her own team.

And she would damn well make sure that her team knew that teamwork was important. She understood what Kakashi-sensei had tried to teach his students. Know your own strengths and weaknesses, and know those of your teammates, and be able to use them to protect your teammates’ backs and complete the mission.

In the ninja world, those who break the rules are trash, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash.

Kakashi had taught Team 7 that lesson well. Even her emotionally obtuse boyfriend understood the importance of saving friends and teammates. And Sakura was going to pass that teaching onto her own students. Even if she had to beat it into their thick skulls.

Which was looking to be the case since they had yet to work as a team to attempt to get the bells.

-JOUNIN-

Sakura had contemplated tying them to the wooden posts of Training Ground Three like Kakashi had done to Naruto, but had decided against it.

It would be much more fun to tie them all together, lecture them on the importance of teamwork, and leave them to get themselves untied.

The rosette made quick work of hunting down her wayward students, used medical chakra to knock them unconscious, tied all for back to back, with extra rope around wrists, elbows, and ankles, and positioned herself in a tree to wait for the fireworks that would appear when they woke.
She purposely tied Hanabi and Moegi together. Not only because their juvenile pride fight would be amusing, but because those two were the ones who most needed to work on their teamwork. There was no way Team 3 could function if its two female members were always at odds with each other.

It hadn’t work too well for her team. It was a miracle they had lasted until the chuunin exams. It didn’t say much for her team’s relationship when they all went separate ways immediately following the joint Sand and Sound invasion.

The spectacle was amusing as she had predicted it would be. Hanabi and Moegi had groused and growled and pointedly look the opposite way, Udon had remained silent (she really needed to get him more involved), and Konohamaru had complained loudly and shouted demands for Sakura to show herself and release them so he could fight her one on one.

Sakura had let them suffer for half an hour before she dropped out of her tree to their stunned and outraged looks.

Looks that shifted to cowed and submissive when she started reprimanding them.

“None of you are worthy of being gennin. Did any of you even wonder why there were two bells when there were four of you?”

“But you said the two that didn’t get the bells would be sent back. There were only two to test us and see who had the skills to be gennin,” Udon said.

“Wrong. There were only two bells so you would be pitted against each other. I didn’t care whether you were stronger than Tsunade-sama. If you could see the overall picture and work together you didn’t deserve to be gennin.”

“But we did work together, Sakura-sensei!” Moegi exclaimed. “Udon and I tried to get the bells from you.”

“Yes, you and Udon. Konohamaru and Hanabi. You worked in pairs, not a team. You’re a team of four. Konohamaru tried multiple times to face me on his own before he joined with Hanabi. But not one of you suggested that you might stand a better chance of facing down a jounin if all four of you worked together.

“You,” she shouted, pointing at Hanabi, “I already told you that my own sensei tested my team on teamwork. You should have known from that start that I wanted all of you to work as one.”

Sakura turned on Udon next. “You were detached. You followed where Moegi lead you but offered no ideas of your own. You’re supposed to be the strategist. It was your job to come up with a plan, with what knowledge you had and taking into account your teammates and your surroundings, that had a chance of success.

“Moegi, you refused to work with Hanabi, and because Konohamaru was with her, him as well.

“And you, Konohamaru, never once thought of asking your teammates for help. You set out on your own thinking you could handle my by yourself.”

All four gennin looked at the ground, ashamed.

“Why do you think we put you into teams? We don’t spend weeks evaluating you and putting together these teams to rip them apart. But, since you did make an effort, I’m going to give you a second chance.”
Four heads snapped up so quickly she could her vertebrae crack. Four pairs of eyes focused on her.

“As you are currently aware, you’re all tied together. I’ve taken away all of your weapons. So, if you can work together to free yourselves, then you pass. If not, I’ll be back in the morning to release you and send you back to the academy.”

Sakura smiled cheerily and waved. She blocked out their protest as she strolled away from Training Ground Three. She had finished up just in time for dinner. Tonight was the weekly dinner between the Naras, Yamanakas, and Akimichis, and her mother wanted to hear all about her team.

-JOUNIN-

The pink haired sensei met with four grumpy gennin outside the Nara compound’s gate.

The good news: they had successfully untangled themselves.

The bad news: they glared at her like they wished to incinerate her with their eyes and still seemed none too willing to get along.

‘Well, that just won’t do,’ she thought, evilly imagining all the mundane and time consuming D-rank missions she could have them do until they got a clue. ‘No wonder Kakashi-sensei was always assigning us missions that made us want to rip our hair out.’

“Good for you guys,” Sakura started, “you managed to get yourselves out.” She smiled brightly as her students continued to throw glares her direction. “Now we can get Team 3’s first mission.”

“Alright! A mission.” Konohamaru yelled happily, pumping a fist in the air. “What are we going to be doing Sakura-sensei? Can we start with a C-rank? I totally have the skills to complete a C-rank mission on my own. I want to guard a princess.”

“Maybe in time, Konohamaru-kun, but you know that all gennin have to start with D-rank.”

The third Hokage’s grandson groaned, earning a sigh from Moegi and rolled eyes from Hanabi, who still refused to look at each other.

-JOUNIN-

Sakura took a leaf out of her own sensei’s book, and got her team assigned to helping and elderly lady with her grocery shopping, one of Kakashi’s thousands of excuses for his lateness.

Only this old lady was a cranky old bat that wanted her students jumping when she demanded it and asking if there was anything they could get her while they were up there. It was all very amusing to Sakura, who watched Konohamaru get whacked repeatedly with a walking stick because he grabbed blackberries, which he enjoyed, and not the blueberries their client wanted. She had the four gennins scurrying around the market fetching whatever food items she wanted. Sakura had never seen Hanabi run that fast.

When the old lady was done her four gennins leaned tiredly against the walls.

“That was horrible, Sakura-sensei. That lady changed her mind every six seconds. Every time we brought her back what she asked for she wanted something different. She blamed us for not following directions.”

“You’re not done yet, my cute gennin. You still have to help her carry the bags home.”
Four horrified faces desperately pleaded for her to change her mind as they glanced between their sensei and the old woman waiting impatiently for her paid labor.

“Get to it.”

Sakura smiled.

-JOUNIN-

It wasn’t unsurprising that Konohamaru and Hanabi constantly pestered her to get them a C-rank mission. Konohamaru was, to say it bluntly, full of himself and thought himself capable to handling a C-rank on his own. Hanabi was leagues beyond her teammates as far as abilities went, and definitely could do a C-rank mission.

But Team 3 wouldn’t be getting one until Sakura was triple sure that all four gennin were ready. Team 7 had asked for a C-rank mission way earlier than was allowed, and were granted it. It turned into a disaster and she did not want that to happen to her team.

So they would have to suffer more D-rank menial tasks. Entirely because she did not believe them capable of working as a team when confronted with danger since they still had issues doing so painting fences.

Team 3 had also helped her gather many plants and herbs that grew abundantly in Konoha’s forest for making antidotes and poisons. Hanabi and Moegi, both interested in being medic nins and already possessing some knowledge of the different herbs they would be gathering, had no trouble with this mission. Udon asked for confirmation before he added anything to the basket, but Konohamaru uprooted and threw anything and everything he saw into the basket.

It created hours of work for Sakura at the hospital because she had to sort through each and every plant. In retribution for her long night, Sakura assigned her team to help Tsunade with paperwork. Her shishou was, of course, behind on her paperwork and delighted to have four gennin to fob off the more repetitive paperwork and filing.

After two months of D-rank missions, in which Team 3 found the escaped Tora a grand total of eleven times, farmed a field, cleaned the Naka river, helped the old lady with her groceries a second time, walked dogs, and even babysitted, Konohamaru snapped.

“I want a C-rank mission baa-chan!”

‘Ouch.’ Naruto was the only one Tsunade allowed to use that ridiculous name, only because she couldn’t stop him from using it no matter how many time nor how hard she hit him. But the Fifth Hokage didn’t take it from snot nosed brats and promptly slammed her fist into the brunette’s head.

While he made nice with the floor, Sakura’s other three gennins jumped to say that they were tired of D-rank and wanted something harder as well.

“Fine, you brats. There’s a monk in Konoha that wants protection for the journey back to his temple. He claims to be carrying some ancient scroll or something that he needs to return to his temple. The Temple is in Tanigakure.”

Sakura mused for a minute. Tanigakure was located in the Land of Rivers, which was situated between the Lands of Fire and Wind, which were now allies due to Gaara taking over as Kazekage and his friendship with Naruto, so this mission would be really safe for her team and a new learning experience.
“We’ll take it, Hokage-sama.”

-JOUNIN-

The monk, who wished to leave for his home immediately, was the worst conversationalist Sakura had ever had the displeasure of meeting, and she was on a team with Sasuke and Sai. He refused to tell them his name, his religion, the object they were protecting, or who he thought might be after it.

Konohamaru, Moegi, Udon, and Hanabi were just as irked as she was. After a half hour of trying and failing to get the answers she was looking for, Sakura gave up and took point, letting the gennin chat. The monk snapped at them to be silent after a minute.

So now the four gennin mulishly took positions surrounding the monk, not one of them looking happy or overjoyed to be on a C-rank mission anymore. They stared obstinately at the ground, making Sakura thank Kami that Tanikgakure was only a day and a half away.

Sakura paid for a night at an inn, the monk refused to sleep outside, and the team set out again early the next morning in order to make it to the monk’s village before nightfall.

It was another silent journey. The monk hissed and spat at anyone who made the slightest noise, which annoyed Sakura because he made the most by stepping on fallen branches and demanding to know their location every five minutes.

So, given that the monk was as noisy as Naruto, well not really but close enough, it came as no surprise that the enemy ninja he was afraid of found him.

What was a surprise was the ninja’s identity, which was easily understood by his red cloud patterned black cloak.

Her students froze in fear, trembling at the sight of an Akatsuki member, while the monk shrieked obscenities (was a monk even supposed to know some of those swear?). Sakura could only bemoan her luck of meeting a second Akatsuki member.

“It would behoove you to hand over the monk, little girl. Yourself as well. Your bounty’s not as high as his, but two for one is good. I’ll even let the sniveling brats live.”

Sakura completely disregard the Akatsuki’s demand in favor of yelling at her client.

“BOUNTY! There’s a bounty on your head! Why wasn’t the Hokage informed? We would have never taken this mission if it had been known there was a potential risk of bounty hunters! This is not a C-rank mission. I can’t believe you allowed innocent gennin to be assigned as your protection! Are you trying to get them killed?”

The rosette never got an answer. It appeared that the Akatsuki was an impatient man. He had stabbed the monk through the heart with the creepiest gray tendrils. She could only stare agog at her now dead client, this was the first mission she had ever failed, before those weird gray things were aiming for her.

“I recognize that pink hair. You’re the girl that killed Hidan.”

Oh Kami. Did this man hold a grudge? Was he out to kill her because she had killed another member of the Akatsuki?

“Hidan was my partner.”
Sakura blinked. ‘Great, this is personal.’ She had thought it odd that he was alone, the Akatsuki always traveled in pairs. But now she had an answer, and she didn’t like it.

“I didn’t care for him. He was arrogant, rushed into battle blindly, believing himself immortal. He constantly let his guard down. His religion was a waste of time.” Well, Sakura could agree with that. “He favored drawn out speeches.” And this rant was what, exactly?

“But you killed him. Your head is worth 2,000,000 ryō, so I will be taking it with me.”

How did she have the misfortune to encounter two Akatsuki members before she was twenty? These people weren’t supposed to make themselves known. Konoha had only ever heard rumors and speculation as to what the Akatsuki was doing.

Sakura had no more time to think about why the Akatsuki was suddenly more active. She put her hard earned dodging skills to the test as she twisted, bended, and jumped to avoid whatever his technique was.

Continuing his impatient tendencies, the Akatsuki switched his target from Sakura to her gennins when he reached the realization that she was harder to hit. Her four gennin were still frozen where they stood and offered no resistance.

Three gennin scattered when the gray tendrils launched their direction, leaping into the trees. Sakura threw herself at the last one, pushing Udon out of the way. The gray thing stabbed Sakura in the right side of her chest. She knew instantly that it had pierced the lower part of her lung.

The gray thread retracted, yanking her towards the Akatsuki member. Using a technique she had copied from Neji, Sakura jabbed two fingers into his chest, directly above his heart, shutting off chakra flow to that organ.

“That was foolish, kunoichi.”

‘Dead man say what?’

That was the problem. Despite the fact that he should have died almost instantly once the chakra flow to his heart was cut off, the Akatsuki was still standing. And she still had a pierced lung that was slowly quickly killing her.

He flung her off the gray tendril and she impacted the ground hard. Sakura ignored the pain, making the seals for Yin Release, releasing the seal around her navel and activating Creation Rebirth to repair her lung.

In the meantime, the Akatsuki member had removed his cloak, revealing the most gruesome sight Sakura had ever seen. She thought she heard one or two of her gennin retching in the canopy above them.

The Akatsuki had tanned skin and green eyes with no pupils. But the most bizarre part was the stitching covering his body, similar to those she had seen on Hidan over a year previously. Clearly they were work of his gray threads.

Just when she thought it couldn’t get worse, he turned around to reveal four masks stitched into his back, and Sakura struggled to keep the bile rising up her throat down.

“Each one of these masks hides a heart.”

‘A heart.’ Her mind echoed. ‘Four hearts. That means he had five.’
“Hidan and I were the perfect partners because neither of us could die easily. But you killed him. It has made it much harder to collect bounties without him.”

Oh, so this was personal because she cost him money, not because he cared for his partner.

“I cannot be killed unless all five hearts are destroyed. I will take yours to replace the one you killed. It's only fitting that I take your heart to replace the one you've destroyed! Then I’ll take the ones from those brats cowering in the trees!”

Then his body exploded into a mass of those gray threads, reaching in every direction. There was a scream from Moegi as one wrapped around her leg and slammed her into a tree. With a loud thunk, the young orange haired girl was unconscious, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth and down her left ear.

Blinded by rage and infuriated that this monster had hurt a student she was supposed to be teaching and protecting, Sakura leapt for the Akatsuki, kunai in hand ready to stab every one of those damned masks.

She was batted away all too easily. She dug into the ground with her left hand and her heels. Hanabi had jumped out of the trees, intent on fighting at her sensei’s side. And while Sakura appreciated the thought that her gennins would protect her, it was her job as the sensei to defend them. Hanabi might have been the most advanced of her four gennin, but she was no match for an Akatsuki member.

The Hyuuga girl was grazed by multiple tendrils and shrieked in pain. Burnt flesh permeated the air. The gray things had burned Hanabi’s skin.

Sakura’s mind whirled. She didn’t know of any jutsu that could stop hearts, and definitely not one that could stop four at once. But if she had to take each one out one at a time, she risked getting herself and her team killed. If they got back to Konoha, she would have to start manipulating medical ninjutsu to take lives as well.

She couldn’t risk her gennin. She needed to get them out of here. There was no chance of them getting back up for her, but she could make sure they escaped. The Akatsuki didn’t seem too eager to kill children. He was after the monk and her because their heads were worth money to someone. Once Team 3 was gone he wouldn’t follow.

“RUN!” she ordered.

“But, sensei…” protested Konohamaru.

“NOW!” she roared.

Unsurely, Konohamaru and Udon picked up their injured teammates and fled, looking back at their sensei until they were out of sight.

“Those brats won’t be able to help you.”

“I never intended for them to.” Sakura snarled.

The gray threads whipped at her again. She dodged tirelessly as she tried to come up with a feasible plan for taking out four hearts at once. She would have aimed for the head again, but after what happened with Hidan, she was sure that decapitating this Akatsuki would actually kill him.

‘Maybe I don’t have to aim for the hearts,’ she thought. A mass explosion should incinerate him. She had a couple dozen paper bombs in her weapons pouch. If she could slap them on his back,
even he shouldn’t be able to survive the explosion.

Plan decided, Sakura tried to maneuver herself behind the Akatsuki, making it look like she was avoiding him. As it was, he seemed to be aware that she was trying to get around him. His creepy technique made it practically impossible to gain an inch in his direction. More often than not she was moving backwards to avoid getting skewered. The gray threads were extremely painful. Some burned her, like they had Hanabi. Some just sliced right through flesh as if they were a well sharpened katana. Others acted like numbing agent, nearly paralyzing limbs.

Healing herself now would have only served exhausting her chakra, so Sakura left them alone. The only thing she thought about was getting behind the Akatsuki and sticking close to a hundred paper bombs on his back.

One tendril smashed into her, crushing her ribcage and slamming her into the ground. Sakura lay still, wheezing and gasping, trying to draw in breath. The Akatsuki approached, confident in his victory.

“It was an interesting fight. I don’t think any shinobi has ever lasted so long against me, so rest assured I will remember you, but I will be taken your head and heart now.”

Sakura pushed past the pain, fought against the black spots that took over her vision. One gray thread was poised above her neck; ready to remove her head from the rest of her body. It drew back, ready to strike, and Sakura shunshined behind him. Before he could react she had plastered paper bomb after paper bomb the masks sewn into his back.

The tendril whipped around to catch her in the stomach, pinning her to a tree. The Akatsuki snarled.

“Boom.”

The paper bombs ignited, flames erupting and spreading. The Akatsuki was soon engulfed in flames.

His screams were those of agony as he was burned alive. The paper bombs continued to explode. The explosion was strong enough to break the tree Sakura was pinned to and send it soaring.

There were flames, screams and black skin, and then Sakura remembered nothing.

-JOUNIN-

The pinkette stared dumbly at the white ceiling above her, absently wondering why she had not already ordered something to be done about them. She remembered nearly being blinded by them the last time she was a patient in the hospital and that hadn’t changed.

She was actually quite surprised to see the hospital’s white ceiling. Sakura did not think she was far enough way to survive an explosion of that magnitude.

She tried to move her right arm, and was rewarded with a searing pain. A groan escaped her lips, startling awake the person at the end of her bed that she had not noticed.

“What, you’re awake!” The relief in his voice was palpable. “Don’t you ever do that again.”

Sakura stared at Shikamaru. Her brother looked like he had not slept in a week. There were dark bags under his eyes, and he looked to have lost a little weight. His brown hair was out of its usual pulled up ponytail, laying limply and looking greasy, so he clearly hadn’t showered in days either.
“Shi. . ka. . .” she rasped.

The Nara heir raced to the connected bathroom to fetch his sister a glass of water, which she accepted gratefully and sipped slowly.

Shikamaru filled her in while she drank. Her team had bumped into Team 7 of all teams on their retreat to Konoha. Their frantic babbling had Kakashi sending one of his summonings to the Hokage with a message that her team had unexpectedly encountered an Akatsuki member that was collecting bounties. Team 7, consisting of Kakashi, Sai, Sasuke, and a new guy named Yamato in her place, had raced after Pakkun who followed her scent. Apparently she used the same shampoo he did.

The blast had thrown her a little under a mile away from the ashes that were all that remained of the Akatsuki member she had fought. Sai had flown her back to Konoha on one of his ink birds, where Tsunade was waiting with a room prepped for her arrival.

She had spent five hours in surgery. Team 7, Team 3, her parents, and Shikamaru had waited anxiously outside her room. At some point the Sasuke’s family had come looking for him, and upon hearing her tale, had decided to wait with the eleven people already assembled.

When the Hokage had emerged and announced that Sakura would be fine Yoshino had collapsed in her husband’s arms. Shikamaru slouched into a chair and Sai had stopped pacing. Her family had demanded to be allowed in to see her, only to be told that Sakura was in a coma.

That news had hit all of the fourteen people that were waiting. Tsunade had allowed four people at a time. Afterwards Shikamaru and Sai had refused to move from her beside, so the Hokage had been forced to allow the two boys to stay.

And they had. For a week neither boy moved far from her bed, anxiously waiting for when she would awaken. After a week had passed Tsunade had put her heeled foot down and demanded they leave. From then on they took turns watching over Sakura.

Shikamaru left to track down the Hokage or Shizune, leaving Sakura to digest everything. She found it almost unbelievable that she had been in a coma for twenty-four days when she hadn’t been expecting to survive the explosion.

But she was alive. And so were her gennins. Hanabi and Moegi had been healed easily, no lasting damage done. But Sakura was still scared. Her team had almost died on that mission, all because that damn monk had lied about the mission ranking. It was scary how similar this situation was to Team 7’s first C-rank. Tazuna had lied about who was after him then too, resulting in their mission be classified as an A-rank mission. The monk had omitted the fact that he had a bounty on his head, causing her team to almost be killed on an S-rank mission.

Sakura supposed she couldn’t blame it all on the monk. Someone should be checking these escort missions to see if the person had a bounty. But still, most of the blame belonged to the monk because he should have informed Konoha of all necessary information so they could offer him the protection he needed.

Sakura had never been so frightened in her life. Not when the village was invaded and they had to fight Gaara. Not even when Hidan had threatened to rape her and sacrifice her to Jashin. Then she only had herself and more experienced teammates to worry about. This Akatsuki membered had promised to kill the gennin she was in charge of. She had nearly failed her duties as a sensei, never mind haven failed to protect their client. The knowledge that she had failed her first mission still stung, but not as much as knowing that any one of her gennins could have died. She had only been a sensei for two, well nearly three now, months, and Sakura could not imagine losing one of
her students.

Shikamaru returned with her shishou, who looked haggard. The busty Hokage did not need to prompt the pinkette for Sakura to tell her story. Tsunade’s eyes had turned stony when she heard that the monk had lied about the rank of the mission and bugged out when Sakura described the Akatsuki she had taken down.

Tsunade sank into the chair that had been previously occupied by Shikamaru, who was sitting at the foot of her bed.

“Is something that matter, Tsunade-shishou?”

Weary amber eyes looked at her. “That was Kakuzu. The so called “Treasurer of the Akatsuki.” He collected bounties to help fund the organization. He was Hidan’s partner because they were both immortal. Supposedly immortal, anyway.” She snorted.

“But now you’ve killed him. You’ve killed two Akatsuki members. And they were both considered immortal.”

“Oh, Kami, Akatsuki’s going to come after me, aren’t they?”

Tsunade could only nod tiredly at her apprentice. There was no doubt that Akatsuki would be enraged by the loss of two of their strongest members to the same kunoichi. Sakura would now be a target.

“I’m going to stop sending you on missions if this is what is going to happen.”

“I’m just following tradition,” teased Sakura. Both Shikamaru and Tsunade stared at her like she was insane. “Team 7’s first C-rank spiraled into an A-rank. I just had to do the same with my team. And I did better than Kakashi-sensei, too. Mine turned into an S-rank mission.”

Tsunade had cuffed the back of her head gently, ordering that she get some sleep. She would need it when everyone found out the next day that she was awake.

Sakura tried to convince Shikamaru to go home. She failed miserably. He gently moved her over and slipped into the bed with her, and Sakura slept soundly, comforted by the beating of his heart and his arms around her.

It turns out she really had needed that sleep. An enraged Tsunade had stormed through the hospital the next morning, literally shaking the building. An unknown person had overheard last night’s conversation.

Sakura’s bingo book entry now read:

*Name: Sakura Haruno*

*Village Association: Leaf Village*

*Age: 15*

*Rank: Apprentice to the Fifth Hokage; Jounin*

*Hair: Pink*

*Eyes: Green*

*Height: 5’4”*
Ninjutsu: Above average. Well versed in Water and Earth nature

Genjutsu: Above average

Taijutsu: Has the super strength of Tsunade

Medical Ninjutsu: On par with Tsunade

Killed Hidan and Kakuzu, believed to be immortal members of the organization Akatsuki, also known as the Zombie Brothers.

Bounty: 17,000,000 ryō.
ANBU Part 1

Chapter Notes

This chapter starts with two omakes in which Shikamaru, Kakashi, Shikaku, and Tsunade put Neji in his place for hurting Sakura. Several readers asked that the scenes be expanded. Each is marked so that you may proceed to the rest of the story if you wish.

First, just Shika and Kakashi.

Shikamaru casually strolled through the busy marketplace of Konoha, weaving between the crowds of women doing their afternoon shopping. He paused in front of a bright red stand. He debated for about half a second; then bought a pound of fresh, ripe, juicy tomatoes.

Bag of produce clutched carefully in hand, he meandered out of the busy streets and towards Team Gai’s training grounds, where he would find the little bastard that broke his little sister’s heart. Sakura deserved a lot better than that Hyuuga. Shikamaru would now carefully screen, stalk his mind supplied, any further potential suitors before Sakura dated again. She had suffered enough pain in the last two years. This would be the last time he saw her shed tears.

The brunette was unsurprised when Kakashi Hatake silently fell into step beside him. He had never sensed his approach, but the Nara had no doubt that he wouldn’t appear. The jounin may have worn a literal mask to hide his emotions, but he also wore a figurative one. His lazy, laid back, and perverted attitude hid analytical eyes and mind. Kakashi cared deeply for the first gennin team he had ever passed, and especially more so for his sister, because she was the delicate female, even though she had proven to be anything but as fragile as her namesake. He kept tabs on his students even after they were no longer his, and helped from the shadows when he could.

“Mou, the sky is so bare today. Not a cloud in sight.” Shikamaru craned his neck to observe the all too blue sky.

Kakashi ‘hmmed’ in agreement.

“With the lack of clouds I decided on a new hobby. I think you’ll rather like this one. It will be just as therapeutical as watching clouds.”

The silver haired jounin replied with another ‘hm.’

“Neji is going to wish he had never met my sister.” Shikamaru declared.

Kakashi nodded next to him, his one eye narrowing. Those who break the rules are scum, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum. He had learned that lesson the hard way. Hurting a comrade was just as bad, if not worse than, abandoning a comrade.

Neji Hyuuga was about to discover what it felt like to be scum.

-Omake-

The only flaw in Shikamaru’s plan was Neji’s Byakugan. It made it much harder for him to be
affected by genjutsu and almost impossible for him and Kakashi to come up on him undetected. But, Shikamaru decided that was unnecessary.

He wanted the Hyuuga to know they were coming, that he was going to feel pain for making Sakura feel pain, for hurting her. He wanted him to feel fear, to be afraid of the inevitable beating he was about to receive.

As predicted, Neji had seen them coming a few miles off and immediately tried to flee. He didn’t need to be the genius he was to know that the arrival of his girlfriend’s brother and sensei the day after he broke up with said girlfriend was bad news.

However, his way was blocked when Kakashi shushined directly in front of him. Before he could react Shikamaru had caught his shadow.

“Why?”

One word was all that the Nara needed to say before the Hyuuga started babbling. Shikamaru caught multiple apologies, a few insults directed at himself (Neji), and pleas to not hurt him.

Shikamaru was unimpressed, especially since the boy was muttering at his own feet. A look at Kakashi let him now that the older man felt the same. So, Shikamaru cut off Neji’s incoherent ramblings with a tomato to the face. It was quite amusing to see him splutter as fruit juice dripped all over his clean, crisp, pristine clothes, soaking in and possibly ruining them.

Neji seemed to be more horrified at what tomato juice would do to his hair, so Kakashi smashed the next three directly into his long brown locks and rubbed them in.

“You are going to explain yourself to Sakura tomorrow. You will apologize for being an absolute idiot of Naruto worthy proportions and beg for her forgiveness. If she does forgive you, you will spend the rest of your lifetime lavishing her and worshipping her and making sure she doesn’t regret the decision to give you a second chance. You will do the same even if she wants nothing to do with you. If she wants you dead, you will thrust your own kunai into your heart. Are we understood?”

Shikamaru may have been the only one to speak, but Neji didn’t need to hear what the Copy-Nin had to say to understand his intent. His chakra spoke for him. Kakashi would never forgive him for hurting his most precious student.

The Hyuuga nodded frantically, vowing to visit the Nara compound early the next day and explain everything to Sakura.

For extra incentive, Kakashi trapped him in a Sharingan based genjutsu, and the two males enjoyed using the Hyuuga as target practice.

When they happily parted ways ten minutes and a pound of tomatoes later, both were smiling, sure that Neji would smell of tomatoes for at least a week to come.

AN: And the second scene, in which Tsunade and Shikaku join the party.

Shikamaru was surprised to return home to find his sister in tears. Again.

A quick explanation from his mother told him that Sakura had learned of hers and Neji’s break up this afternoon from Hanabi. Apparently, Neji hadn’t told them everything when they had cornered him earlier. There had been no mention of his not telling Sakura about the end of their relationship.
He concluded that Kakashi must have followed him home, wanting to check in on his favorite student and see how she was coping for himself, because Shikamaru found him leaning casually against the wall outside his front door.

They passed his father on the way out of the compound and two became three. The trio did not set off in search of the lying swine that had just crushed the heart of a young girl, but instead towards the Hokage tower. Tsunade-sama was very fond of her talented second apprentice.

After the blonde had shouted at Shikamaru and Kakashi for not coming to her the first time, the group of four made plans. Shikaku pointed out that it would be too obvious if Kakashi or his son tracked down the Hyuuga for a second time that day, and suspicious if he showed up, given his capacity as Jounin Commander and the child’s chuunin rank. However, it would be too out of the ordinary if the Fifth Hokage randomly sought out and beat up a boy that was known to be dating her apprentice.

So a runner was sent to summon Neji to the Hokage’s office, which was conveniently soundproof.

An unsuspecting Neji was firmly and harshly clouted to the back of the head by an angry father as soon as he crossed the threshold and trapped in place once again by the Nara’s famous shadow jutsu.

Even with his eye closed and curved in the distinctive u-shape of when he was happy, Kakashi’s dark eye still had a maniacal glint.

Tsunade took great joy and pleasure in indefinitely assigning the chuunin drudge work until he apologized to Sakura, which she was sure would be well in the future given the sheer amount of pride the Hyuugas, males particularly, had.

His despair was like music to their ears. Shikaku had fun threatening to remove his manhood, “If you even have it,” as retribution. Shikamaru used his control of the shadows to make Neji beat himself up; amusing himself with the possible explanations he might make to explain his bruising the next day. And Kakashi quite cheerfully promised to sic his ninja hounds on the Hyuuga should he come within fifty feet of his student.

The torture was completed with another genjutsu, one that left Neji trembling and unable to sleep that night, and an unexplainable dock in his next pay that left his teammates confused as to why he received so much less than them. He only blushed and said he did not know. Only Gai noticed the evil grin on their Hokage’s face.

-ANBU-

The story continues here.

-ANBU-

Whispers followed Sakura through the village. They hushed when she walked by and murmured behind her back, when they thought she couldn’t hear them.

“That girl killed two Akatsuki?”

Stares of disbelief were all she met. No one believed she was capable of taking down two S-rank criminals that even top ANBU couldn’t defeat. There were even whisperings of her possibly being in league with the Akatsuki that even Tsunade, the Hokage, couldn’t keep hushed.

Sakura didn’t care what the villagers thought of her. She didn’t care that the shinobi were secretly
watching her every move to determine if she was a threat to their village. Her loyalty would always be to Konoha.

She did care about her team. Her carelessness had nearly gotten her team killed. The rosette had not learned from her sensei’s mistake. She should have demanded the answers. She needed that information to effectively complete the mission. The knowledge the monk had withheld would have kept her team safe. Sakura would never, never, have accepted a mission if there was even rumors that the Akatsuki after the client.

But she had been lax. While irked about the lack of answers, she let the monk keep his silence. She may have laughed in the hospital about her team following in Team 7’s footsteps, but she wasn’t joking. It was the exact same situation. The lack of important and necessary information resulted in the almost death of at least one gennin.

Looking back after the fact, the only one who had come remotely close to death was Sakura herself. Moegi and Hanabi and been the only ones injured, and the concussion, broken tibia, and third degrees burns were easily healed and the two were released from the hospital within a day.

None of that registered with her, though. All she could think about was how she failed Team 3 as their sensei. Her four students had tried to make her see that it wasn’t her fault; that they were alright because of her, that they didn’t blame her or believe that she had let them down. In fact, they profusely insisted that she was the coolest kunoichi in the village.

Sakura found herself at Team 7’s bridge. This place reminded her of happier times. Times when all she had to worry about was when she would find the time to juggle all the training and senseis she had. When she chewed her nails, anxious about the upcoming chuunin exams and psyched herself into believing that she wasn’t good enough to be promoted. Those times seemed like ages ago.

There was a whirl of displaced wind and fluttering leaves as her former sensei transported next to her. One hand held his ever present Icha Icha novel and the other familiarly ruffled her candy colored locks. He didn’t say anything, and she didn’t need him to. Kakashi knew more than anyone how she was feeling at the moment, for he had been through the same situation with her own team.

“How did you manage?”

He gave her a sidelong glance, gently replacing his porn in his hip pouch. “I won’t lie to you. It wasn’t easy. You were the most difficult team I had ever met, and I still passed you for some reason. I must have been insane.” Kakashi smiled fondly at her.

“The three of you could be an absolute nightmare to teach, at times.”

“Hey, you mean that Naruto and Sasuke were nightmares,” she jabbed her elbow none too gently into his ribs, delighting in his wince, “I was an angel.”

“Yes, an angel that thought my training wasn’t enough and left me alone with the two of them.” He said dryly.

Sakura flinched, guilty. She had never meant to make him feel that he wasn’t enough, that he couldn’t teach her, but she wanted to improve as fast as she could.

“Don’t think like that, Sakura. You are my favorite student. The point of gennin teachers is to help gennins develop skills beyond the basics in the areas they are talented in and ensure that they are at the least passable in the other areas. There’s no such thing as a perfect shinobi. It’s natural
that you would seek out further instruction from teachers that could help you more than I could.

“Most senseis don’t get attached to their gennins. They’ll teach a new group every year. Their students are just another name to them, just another shinobi or kunoichi of Konoha doing their duty. They don’t need to understand their students to make them successful ninja, and so they don’t.

“But I couldn’t do that. I learned years ago that your teammates were the most important. Ninja were supposed to develop strong bonds that would connect us further and incite us to learn more, learn faster, train harder and longer, make us better, more capable ninja.

“After all, those who break the rules are scum, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum.” Sakura repeated with him, grinning slightly.

“I cared for the three of you. I managed by promising to ensure you a better future. I would teach you all you needed to know to not just survive and complete missions, but be a true shinobi of Konoha.”

Sakura nodded. That’s exactly what she wanted to do for Konohamaru, Moegi, Udon, and Hanabi. She wanted them to shine, to have bright futures as talented, well-known, loyal shinobi proud of their village.

Kakashi sighed. “Your first C-rank mission was not easy. I wanted to march all of you back to the village and demand that the Hokage assign more capable shinobi to be Tazuna’s escort. Someone had clearly wanted him dead and that was not a mission any gennin should be on.”

His student nodded again. She agreed whole heartedly with that sentiment. “But the three of you were so stubborn. I regretted continuing the mission when we encountered Zabuza, even more so when I had to watch my students fight the Demon of the Mist. I nearly had a heart attack when I saw Naruto and Sasuke charging Zabuza. But at that point I knew we couldn’t back out. Tazuna and the rest of Wave were in desperate need of help and we were the only ones in any position to help them.

“Although waking up weak in his house went a long way in ensuring that the mission continued.” Kakashi glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, pleased that his comment had elicited a giggle from the girl.

“You won’t always be prepared for what may happen on a mission. All you can do is adjust for the surprises that come and try to get everyone out alive. And that’s what you did, Sakura. You made sure that all of your gennins returned home safely.”

“But I failed the mission.” She whispered.

Kakashi laughed. “Missions are failed every day. Each shinobi faces failure at some point in his career. It happened to you early, is all. Now you’ll be more prepared next time. You won’t make the same mistakes.”

“Thank you.”

Sakura hugged her sensei, trying to convey through touch how grateful she felt for his advice and how much she appreciated all he had done for her. Then she went to surprise her gennins with training, but not a mission yet. She didn’t think she was ready for that yet.

-ANBU-

Kakashi Hatake watched as his pink haired student walked away from the bridge. He mourned for
the loss of her innocence. The last year had opened her eyes to the true world of the shinobi. He had led his first mission at a jounin when he was her age. It had ended even more disastrously than hers had. Obito had died on that mission, and he never forgave himself for caring more about completing the mission than he did his own teammates and comrades.

It was with a heavy heart he watched Sakura go. He thought she was too young to bear the burden of responsibility that came with being in charge of a team of gennin. She had only been a gennin herself two years ago. Kakashi knew that she was mature for her age, all ninja were, but she was even more so. Unfortunately, he couldn’t shelter her from death. She had already lost her parents and death was common in the hospital. Death changed a person, he knew that personally. He did not want to see her end up like him.

The thought that maybe he shouldn’t have pushed her towards medic training briefly passed through his mind. He paid little attention to it. Kakashi knew that Sakura enjoyed helping people, which is exactly what she did as a medic. She saved lives and made sure shinobis returned home to their families.

Kakashi couldn’t be more proud of his favorite student. Looking at her now, he truly believed that she would be the most famous member of his team. She was stronger than even he had imagined. Sakura had grown the most out of his three students and was now the most accomplished person on Team 7. She would pull through this. She would bounce back stronger than before, ready to show the world that kunoichi were not to be underestimated. And she would teach that strength to her gennins, and he Will of Fire would be sparked in the next generation.

-ANBU-

Hanabi was trying to meditate.

Trying was the key word. It wasn’t that she found meditation difficult. It was actually rather easy for her. Sakura-sensei said it would help her control her chakra and make her a deeper thinker, so she made a habit of meditating a couple of hours each day.

She didn’t normally practice before training started, because Konohamaru and Moegi were so noisy that it was usually pointless. But the duo, all four of them really, had been quiet since Team 3’s last mission. Sakura-sensei had yet to show up for training.

Part of Hanabi wondered if maybe their sensei was going to quit, to stop teaching, maybe even quit being a shinobi. She never would have imagined Sakura doing something so dramatic a week ago, but that was before they had encountered that Akatsuki guy. She desperately wanted to believe that her sensei just needed more time to heal and that she wasn’t abandoning them.

The second daughter of Hiashi Hyuuga could not meditate. She stood, stretching her arms above her head, and twisted her back. She groaned when it cracked audibly, loud enough to draw her older teammates’ attention.

Because of this, all four conveniently missed the appearance of their sensei, who took the opportunity handed to her to create a water dragon from the lake and send it smashing into her students.

“Sakura-sensei!” they cried. The four gennins dog piled their sensei, who collapsed laughing beneath them.

“Did my cute students miss me?”
All of her students blushed at being referred to as cute. Sakura made a note to avoid Kakashi. Every time she talked to him she picked up one of his habits. This time it was calling her students cute. Last time it was being lazy and not doing the paperwork her shishou gave her, which resulted in an hour long lecture/rant from the busty Hokage about dereliction of duty and what not. She did not want to start being chronically late or reading porn in public.

“All right, get off of me. We have training today. You know the drill, laps first.”

Four gennin saluted her with a raised hand parallel to their foreheads and a synchronized “Yes, ma’am!”

Sakura laughed once more as she watched them start, vowing to protect their innocence for as long as possible.

-ANBU-

It was a month before Sakura was comfortable enough to accept another mission for her team. She had planned to stick to D-ranks for the first couple, but Kakashi had visited her and said it would be better for both her and her students if she took a C-rank. Sakura needed to see that she could successfully lead a C-rank mission, and the gennins needed to realize that they were capable of completing one.

The pinkette had grudgingly agreed and asked Tsunade for a messenger assignment to somewhere nearby.

The Hokage had sent team 3 to a small town where she had spent a couple of months a few years ago and had run up quite a tab at the local casino.

The mission was easy. Her team traveled to the casino in less than a day, handed over the money to the owner and were back on their way to Konoha. They encountered no trouble. No Akatsuki. No bandits. No thieves.

Upon return to Konoha, Sakura let out a breath that she hadn’t realized she was holding. Until she had walked through those gates, she was still half expecting a ninja to jump out of the trees and try to kill her and her students. As much as it galled her to admit it, her sensei was right. She felt lighter knowing that she could still lead her gennins on a successful mission, and looking at said gennins, she saw that they were basking in their accomplishment.

-ANBU-

The set the pattern for the next month and a half. Sakura continued pushing her gennins with difficult tasks and letting them take increasing longer quests. Her gennins were getting better. They were getting along better, had grown more skilled, and were completing quests with an efficiency eerily similar of what her own team, both her own gennin team and her current one were capable of.

She had taken a mission here and there with her own team, mostly when they needed a medic. Sadly, it was the only time she ever got to see her boyfriend these days, and it seemed that without her there to help him, or correct him as the case may be, he had reverted back to his old well meaning, truthful, but insulting manner of talking.

She had met Yamato. Her first thought was that he had an even better poker face that Fugaku. It was almost on scale with Kakashi’s, although she honestly thought nobody would ever have a better poker face than her sensei.

Sakura was caught off guard when Kakashi asked her if she would be at the gates in the morning
to wait for Naruto’s return. Her last couple of months had been so hectic that she had forgotten that Naruto was due to return soon.

She had returned home with a grin big enough to break her face and exclaimed gleefully to her family that Naruto would be back tomorrow. She asked Shikamaru to come with her, because she wanted to let him know immediately that she had found family in the Naras. She also wanted to actually introduce Shikamaru as her brother to someone, and her blonde teammate was the only one who didn’t know. Shikamaru knew what she wanted and agreed.

Sakura bounced out of bed the next morning before the sun was even up. She released pent up energy by training with Lee and Gai-sensei, making sure to leave before Neji and Tenten arrived. The rosette still felt awkward around her ex-boyfriend. Tenten’s attitude made the situation worse. The bun haired girl blamed their Sakura’s and Neji’s break up on the pinkette, claiming that she was responsible for Neji’s broken heart, and started snubbing, ridiculing, and ignoring her. Sakura decided it was best to just avoid all confrontation.

She met up with her gennins, informed them of the delayed practiced, and invited them to come wait for Naruto with her. Konohamaru, Moegi, and Udon raced to the gates. Hanabi said she was interested in meeting the final teammate of her sensei and trailed after her own teammates.

So, by the time Sakura arrived at Konoha’s gates, there was a whole entourage waiting for Naruto’s return.

And they didn’t have to wait long.

“I’m back, Konoha!” a familiar voice yelled. It was deeper than she remembered, but that was expected. Naruto was no longer a twelve year old boy. A figure dressed in orange and black somersaulted off the top of the gates, landing in front of the gaggle of people waiting to welcome him back.

His three loyal gennins got to him first, shoving him to the ground and excitedly telling him everything that had happened since he had left. Sakura stood back as he greeted the rest of team seven and observed him.

Naruto was growing into a man. He had definitely hit a growth spurt, because he now towered over her height wise. His shoulders and chest were broader, and beneath the orange and black jumpsuit she could see defined muscles. She was glad to see that some things hadn’t changed in the long years he had been training. He still had the same bright smile, the same sparkling cerulean eyes full of fun and mischief that were still serious, the same spiky blonde hair that could not be tamed, the same enthusiasm, and the same love of the color orange and ramen.

She pushed her way past her gennins that were listening avidly to a story that Naruto was telling about a new jutsu he learned and gave her teammate a bone crushing hug.

“Sakura-chan! When did you get so strong?”

“It’s good to have you back, Naruto.” She laughed. “How about we go get some ramen and catch up?”

“That sounds awesome! Believe it! Does this mean you’ll finally go on a date with me, Sakura-chan?”

She punched him none too gently in the shoulder. “No, I’m paying. And I already have a boyfriend. Come on Hanabi, Moegi, Udon, Konohamaru. We’re going for ramen.”

Naruto rubbed his shoulder and shouted after her. “What do you mean you have a boyfriend?
Sakura-chan!

-AnBU-

Teams Kakashi, both old and new, and Team Sakura plus Shikamaru enjoyed lunch at Ichiraku’s Ramen. Naruto inhaled seventeen bowls. Sakura was grateful for the half off discount Teuchi was giving her because his favorite customer was back and the handsome pays she had received for the upper level missions and the bounties on the Akatsukis she had killed, otherwise she didn’t think she could have afforded to feed the ramen deprived future Hokage.

Naruto learned that the rest of their age group had increased in rank in the years he had been gone. Everyone was at least a chuunin. The look on his face when he realized (it had to be pointed out to him by Shikamaru) that he was the only gennin was hilarious. Naruto had actually spat out a mouthful of ramen, right onto Sasuke. Sakura was the only jounin. He had been surprised to learn the she was a Tokubetsu Jounin and was teaching her own team of gennins.

Naruto had given her a bear hug, proclaiming loudly about how awesome it was that she was a jounin and pleading to join her team’s training sessions so he could see her teach. With five pairs of puppy dog eyes pointed her way, Sakura had no choice but to tell him he could come. But she really didn’t mind in the least.

After lunch, Kakashi had invited his team to have another attempt at his famous bell test. Naruto had jumped to his feet and accepted for all of them, proclaiming that he would now totally beat his sensei with his awesome new jutsu. Even Sasuke wasn’t grouchy about having to take the test again. Both he and Sakura were anxious to see how much their teammate had grown.

Sai, Sakura, Naruto, and Sasuke stood in a line facing the silver haired jounin. Two silver bells jingled from his weapons pouch. Kakashi shouted begin and the game began.

-AnBU-

Sakura shook her head disappointedly. This bell test had turned out interestingly. This time found Sasuke tied to the post. After three years and two tries at this test, the broody Uchiha still had not thought about working with the rest of his team. He had tried to fight the Copy-Nin one on one, and received a royal beat down in his efforts to prove himself. She thought it was about time somebody beat the arrogance out of him, though judging by the dark glower Sasuke was directing at the rest of his team, not even Kakashi could beat some humility into him.

Sakura, Sai, and Naruto had worked spectacularly together, once she had beaten out a similar idea of striking out on his own from the blonde’s head. She understood that he wanted to see how he matched up against their sensei, who, despite his flaws, they had idolized as gennins, but the point of this test wasn’t to out power him, but to out maneuver him.

Kakashi foiled many, many plans. He didn’t just want to see if they could work together. This time their objective had been to get the bells away from him, and every time she took this test, Sakura swore it got harder.

Despite not knowing what his most exuberant student was now capable of, he managed to evade the three of them every time. Sakura would admit that Naruto’s Rasengan completely caught their sensei off guard. It was the closest they had come to hitting him all day.

It took the remainder of the day, but Naruto had finally discovered the one weakness they could use against Kakashi. For once, his annoying love of porn and reading those smutty books written by Jiraiya was going to help him.
They had tracked down their sensei with some of Sai’s ink animal, a technique that Naruto thought was so cool, and tricked him into closing both his ears and his normal and Sharingan eyes so that he could not hear or lip read the spoiled ending to the book he was reading (the newly released Icha Icha Tactics which Naruto had a part in writing unbelievably), which allowed Sakura to grab the bells.

She clapped him on the shoulder. They all had a good laugh once he realized he had been tricked. Naruto made a joke about how he was getting on in age if he was beaten so easily. Kakashi replied by disappearing and dumping Naruto into the lake.

Sakura had bid Team Kakashi an early goodnight, for her team had a mission in the morning. Sai walked her home, as he always did whenever they could get together, and Naruto accompanied them, asking a million questions about their relationship and how Sakura was living with the Naras.

She answered his questions and invited him to come to the next Friday dinner. Naruto accepted eagerly and ran off to meet with Tsunade, whom he was supposed to see immediately upon his return. Sadly, Sakura did not feel bad for getting him in trouble with her shishou. For the first time in a long time, she felt like her life was complete again, and she thoroughly enjoyed the day she had spent with the blonde. Besides, she knew that Naruto wouldn’t really get into any trouble. He had this way of charming people, and it worked on the Hokage. It was an unusual gift, but, without saying much, Naruto immediately ended up becoming friends with anyone.

The next morning her team set out for a village between Konoha and Suna, delivering yet another payment of their Hokage’s seemingly endless gambling tab. With an umpteenth debt settled, the team started the trek back to the village.

Not even an hour into the journey they intercepted an injured messenger hawk. It was Takamaru, Sunagakure’s fastest hawk. Sakura quickly scanned the message. It was one of the benefits of being the Hokage’s apprentice and assistant.

Her eyes widened in horror as she read the short encoded message.

She stopped her students in their tracks, healed the hawk, and practically threw it back into the air.

“Alright guys. We’re going to have to head to Suna. Their Kazekage had been captured by the Akatsuki and his brother has been poisoned. You are going to have to follow every order I give to the letter.”

Sakura didn’t need to ask if they understood. Their demeanors hardened and their backs straightened. They knew this was a serious situation. She turned them around and set a fast and hard pace to Suna. If she pushed, they could reach Suna in less than a day. She only hoped her gennin were capable of withstanding the grueling pace she set. She knew the risks of going in blind all too well, but Suna was in desperate need of aid, and they were the closest team Konoha had to Suna. Luckily, Sakura was more than well versed in identifying poisons.

They reached the gates of Suna when the moon shone high in the sky. The guards let them pass, having been informed to expect reinforcements and aid from their ally village. Sakura asked one for directions to Kankuro, and was directed towards the hospital.

She ignored the surprised nurses that demanded for her to explain her appearance and went
straight for the fourth floor, where the poison ward of the hospital should be. Temari had been startled to see her, not expected anyone from Konoha until later tomorrow, but quickly dragged her into Kankuro’s room and order the medics in there to listen to her.

Sakura wasted no time barking out orders for two bowls of water. The two medics attending the Kazekage’s brother gaped at her.

“Don’t just stand there! Get me that water!”

When neither looked like they were going to move she signaled Hanabi to do it. Sakura had taken Hanabi on many rounds at the hospital, so the girl knew the general layout and could do what the medics were not. Surprisingly, Hanabi took Moegi with her to carry the second bowl. Sakura wondered if their shared recent attack had somehow brought them closer together, but she didn’t have time to focus on the interrelationship of her students.

The two girls hurriedly returned with the requested bowls of water, setting them at her side on a table she had Udon and Konohamaru move. She issued more orders at the medics that were still standing around aimlessly. Once all of this was over, she was going to have to convince her shishou and the Kazakage that Suna’s hospital was in desperate need of an overhaul.

She asked Temari if she was felt well enough to hold down her brother. The blonde nodded stiffly, moving to the puppet master’s beside and forcefully clamping down on his shoulders. Sakura nodded gently at her, and softly told her gennins to hold down his limbs. She could not have him thrashing about as she removed the poison. The less he moved the less it spread.

Sakura drew chakra to her hands, placing one Kankuro’s chest to keep him from moving and the other hovered over the first bowl of water. She molded the water into a sphere and brought it over the wound. With a deep breath to steady herself, Sakura forced the water into the open wound, drawing the poison out of his veins, tissues, and organs and suspending it in the water so she could remove it. She disposed of the contaminated water in the second bowl.

Kankuro attempted to thrash. His movements were restricted and he bucked uselessly against the hands restraining him. Sakura repeatedly inserted and withdrew water laced poison until the water came out without a hint of purple. She closed the stab wound easily.

Sakura put a sample of the poison into a vial and safely disposed of the rest. That done, she turned to Temari.

“I haven’t removed all of the poison. Even as advanced as this technique is, there are still trace amounts left behind. I need to analyze the poison and create an antidote that you can give to him. Once he has the antidote he will heal completely.”

The pinkette found herself with an armful of a sobbing Sand kunoichi. She consoled the blonde and reassured her that Kankuro would be as right as rain as soon as he received the antidote. Temari thanked her repeatedly, promising Sakura anything she wanted for saving her brother. Sakura gave her one more hug, said she would appreciate it if accommodations for her gennins could be acquired and if she could have someone escort her to Suna’s greenhouse so she could get started on creating an antidote.

With something that needed to be done, Temari pulled herself together. She offered to take Sakura to the greenhouse herself and settle in her students at the Kazekage’s house for the night. Sakura nearly protested, sure that Temari would want to remain with her brother and not be trekking her and her gennins all over Suna, not to mention that she didn’t need to invite them into the home she shared with her brother, but the look in the blonde’s eyes stopped her. They were red rimmed and puffy and clearly said that she needed to be doing something, that she needed to feel like she was
needed.

So the pinkette allowed the Kazekage’s sister to drop her off at Suna’s small greenhouse and take her students to her house for the night. Once Temari was gone she cracked her back, preparing for a long night of no sleep as she worked tirelessly to identify the separate components of an unknown poison and develop a whole new antidote for it.

-ANBU-

Sakura was gently shaken awake by a very cross herb caretaker that had not been informed about the guest that had taken over her greenhouse. Sakura didn’t stay long enough for the older woman to work up a rant. The greenhouse wasn’t large, but it had everything she had needed to make three doses of the antidote, one of which had to be given to Kankuro.

She traced her steps through the winding roads of Suna back to the hospital. This time no one tried to stop her as she darted on through to the fourth floor. Temari had returned to her brother’s hospital room, probably as soon as she had seen Sakura’s team asleep, and was dozing in an uncomfortable chair against the wall near the door.

She startled awake and jumped to put a kunai at the throat of whoever it was that was entering Kankuro’s room, but Sakura easily pushed the dagger aside. The blonde dropped it and collapsed wearily into her chair when she woke up enough to see that the person she had tried to stab was Sakura.

The rosette gave her a knowing smile before crossing to Kankuro’s bedside to administer the antidote. “He’ll be fine now. Most likely he’ll be awake in a couple of hours. I’m going to go to your house, check on my gennins, and get some rest. Send a runner to get me if he’s in any pain or if anything goes wrong.”

“Will anything go wrong?”

Sakura smiled gently. “No, it shouldn’t. Sometimes the patient has an adverse reaction to medicine. That’s easily fixed so long as a medic is notified as soon as possible. So just watch over him carefully.”

Temari nodded again. She imagined by this point that the fan wielder was able to do anything else. Sakura briefly placed her hand on the older woman’s shoulder and then strode out of the hospital. She was more than ready to fall into a bed and sleep for the rest of the day. She was exhausted, maybe not as much as Temari, but fairly damn close.

Unfortunately, Sakura did not have time to rest. She returned to the Kazekage’s house, although it looked more like a mansion than a house, to find a pacing Team 7 that had been sent from Suna’s request for aid. And not one of them knew what was going on, so Sakura had to explain.

It was a long explanation, mostly because Naruto and Sasuke could not keep their mouths shut. The blonde exclaimed over Sakura’s ability, commenting on how much stronger she was and how she was so awesome and that he wanted to spar with her when they had the chance. Sasuke attempted to send her scathing comments and insult her and was then yelled at by Naruto, which resulted in a shouting match of “Dobe” and “Teme” before Yamato pulled a scary face with a flashlight under his chin.

As soon as she finished Naruto was trying to run out the door and hunt down the Akatsuki that had taken his friend. This time it was Kakashi that stopped him.

“Relax, Naruto. We don’t know which direction they went. We would waste more time running
around blindly trying to find them then we would if we waited to get the details of the attack.”

“Kankuro fought one of them. He might know which direction they went.”

“Excellent. I’ll go talk to him now,”

“No, you won’t.” Sakura interrupted.

Kakashi blinked at her. “I won’t?”

“No, you won’t.” She repeated fiercely. “Kankuro is recovering from a poison extraction technique and is not fit enough to be questioned. He will be awake in a couple of hours. Then you can interrogate him. But until then, you are going to stay here. And you will all be quiet,” Sakura pointedly glared at Naruto, Sasuke, and Sai. “because I have not slept in over twenty-four hours. And none of you want an angry, sleep deprived medic operating on you.”

Hasty promises to keep as silent as a grave were extracted from her teammates. A much happier Sakura climbed the stairs in search of her four gennins that were probably still awake waiting for her. She found them easily, by following their chakra signatures which she could pick out in a crowd of ninjas after six months together.

Hanabi was sitting crossed legged on the floor, trying to meditate. It wasn’t working. Sakura could see her left eye twitching. Moegi curled onto the windowsill, arms wrapped around bended knees as she rested her head against the window. Udon sat at the only desk in the room, studying a taijutsu scroll she had given him two weeks before. Konohamaru flopped on his back on the bed. He had apparently shifted many times, because the bedspread was a mussed as if he had slept in it.

But none of them had slept through the night, as was evident by the purple shadows under her students’ eyes. They were in over their heads again and it showed. They were stressed and anxious. They were only here because she had found the injured messenger hawk. Gennins had no place on missions to rescue a kage. It was too dangerous.

The whole situation had Sakura in a conundrum. As their sensei, she was supposed to teach them, protect them, and help them grow. She was duty bound to lead them. But she couldn’t take them with her when they set off to face Akatsuki and rescue the Kazekage. But she also couldn’t leave them in Suna, as they were her responsibility, and there was no time to detour to Konoha and see them safely back in the village. As much as it killed her, it looked like Sakura was forced to bring her team with her. She prayed that she would be able to keep them out of harm this time.

The Third Hokage’s grandson was the first to notice her standing in the doorway. He had sat up from the bed with a huff and crossed his arms.

“Sakura-sensei! Did you save that guy?”

His cry got the attention of his three teammates, and all four gennin gathered at the door to ask Sakura if she saved Kankuro.

“Yes, he’s fine. He’s sleeping now, as you should be.” They shuffled their feet guiltily at her admonishment. “And you clearly need to work on your chakra sensing skills. I was standing here for five minutes. If I was an enemy you would be dead.”

It was said teasingly, but all four of them knew that the message was serious.

“Right, we have a couple of hours until Kankuro wakes up and we can get the information we need to follow the Akatsuki, so why don’t we all try to get some rest.”
“We? We’re going with you?” Moegi asked.

“Yes. I can’t leave you here, and there’s no one who can take you back to Konoha. The four of you will have to come along.” Sakura’s tone became very serious. “You will stay out of the way. If we encounter any Akatsuki I want you to run, do you understand me?”

“It’s because we’re only gennin. That’s not fair sensei. Naruto’s still a gennin. We can fight.” Konohamaru pouted.

“No.” Four gennins stared at her shocked as she snapped.

“Yes, you are only gennins, but that is not why I’m not letting you fight. None of you are ready to fight S-rank ninjas. Don’t let arrogance cloud your judgment. You all know you don’t have a chance against a missing-nin. I will not see you killed because you foolishly disobeyed my orders.

“And Naruto might be a gennin, but he is also a Jinchuuriki. Not to mention he is older than you and has had more training. He has been preparing to fight the Akatsuki for more than two years now.”

Four heads nodded their understanding and agreed to stay out of any fighting that may occur. Sakura smiled. At least she knew her gennins would be safe if anything disastrous happened.

And that was almost a given. Something always went wrong when Team Kakashi was on the job. It was like they were a magnet for bad karma.

-ANBU-

Sakura only got roughly four hours of sleep before Naruto woke her up by slamming open the door of the room they were given.

And if the door didn’t wake her, his voice would have.

“WAKE UP SAKURA-CHAN! Kankuro’s awake and he and Temari want you there before Kakashi asks any questions. You need to hurry, because the bastard’s getting twitchy waiting for you, and because we need to save Gaara.”

Sakura kicked Udon off the bed. Her students had joined her on the bed for a nap. It was cramped with five of them in a bed meant for two people at the most. Legs crossed and body parts piled. She apologized to him and they shook awake the other three.

“Go on, Naruto. We’ll be there soon.”

Naruto nodded and left. Team 3 quickly refreshed themselves and Sakura hurried them over to the hospital.

Kankuro was looking much better. His skin had regained its color, and was now nice and flushed. He was breathing naturally and his eyes were no longer glazed with pain. She ran a quick check up just to make sure that there were no lingering traces of poison.

“How are you feeling, Kankuro-san?”

“Just Kankuro. I think you have the right to call me that. You saved my life. And I’m fine.”

Sakura rolled her eyes. Of course he was fine. Males never admitted they were anything other than fine, even when she could clearly see they were not.
“That’s good. Kakashi-sensei wants to ask you a few questions. Is that alright?”

Apparently it was more than alright. The brunette tried to sit up and winced when he had raised his torso half off the bed. Yeah, he was just fine.

“Those Akatsuki are bastards. The one I fought used puppets. He said he made his own poisons. He left me for dead. Had you not come, it would have been dead. He said it only took three days.”

Sakura worried her bottom lip. She didn’t want to fight a puppet master that created his own poisons. He would be able to fight from a distance, and almost everyone here was a short distance fighter, and she hated the possibility of not have the necessary antidotes on hand.

“I got a scrap of his cloak.”

Kakashi stepped forward to grab the piece of cloth that Kankuro held in a clenched hand. Sakura wondered how she had not noticed that earlier.

“Well, then, I think it’s time we got a move on. Let’s go grab our packs.” Kakashi ordered.

“Wait.” Temari had stood. “Let me come with you. We can’t just let you save our Kazekage. Someone from Suna needs to go with. Let me go. I need to save my brother.”

Sakura was about to say that she thought that Temari should stay here with Kankuro, but an elderly woman had entered Kankuro’s room, and with a screech of “YOU!” bodily launched herself, kunai in hand, at her silver haired sensei.

Kakashi’s widened comically and he raised his hands in the universal sign of peace. He still had to duck under the swung kunai.

“DIE WHITE FANG OF KONOHA!” The crazy old lady took another swing at her sensei.

Naruto leapt in between, stopping the attack by grabbing the woman’s wrist and then support his own hand by bracing it with his other arm. A clone Sakura hadn’t even seen him make latched onto the woman from behind and pulled her away.

“Why are you going at Kakashi-sensei so suddenly for? You wrinkled old hag!” he shouted.


Kakashi took a step back, protesting about not being whoever this White Fang was, but the senile lady charged again.

An old man, just as wrinkled as the woman, stepped in front of her and help up a hand. “Take a good look, sister. There is a strong resemblance, but he is not the White Fang of Konoha.”

His sister stopped, blinked, and studied Kakashi. Then laughed as if she hadn’t tried to kill him and passed it off as senility.

Sakura agreed. This old woman had clearly lost her mind.

“We don’t have time to be fighting. We need to go find those Akatsuki and save Gaara!”

Naruto reminded everyone that they needed to get going.

“I’m coming with you.” Temari stated.
“No. I’ll go.” The old woman spoke.

Sakura shared a look with Naruto. He looked as confused as she felt. Neither one of them wanted the person who had tried to attack their sensei to come with them.

“One of the Akatsuki is my grandson. I taught him everything he knows about puppets.”

Kakashi agreed to let her join their party. Sakura wasn’t happy. The woman was now glaring at her for some reason. But she could see the benefits of having along someone who knew the enemy and could wield puppets.

The group of eleven finally left Suna, following Pakkun as he tracked the scent of Sasori of the Red Sand, Chiyo’s grandson.

Sakura dropped to the end of the column with Sai, having not been able to properly talk with him at all since he had arrived. Her students traveled in front of her where she could keep an eye on them.

As if he could read her mind, Sai said, “They’ll be fine. They have you looking after them.”

Sakura appreciated her boyfriend’s confidence and belief in her, because her own was lacking. They had not been fine the last time they had a run in with the Akatsuki. Neither had she for that matter. She had landed herself in the hospital both times.

Still, she threaded her fingers through Sai’s, and the two continued to leap through treetops hand in hand. She would have to take more missions with Team Kakashi. She rarely got to see her boyfriend these days.

A couple hours into the journey Kakashi received a messenger bird from Lady Tsunade saying that she was sending reinforcements. Despite the fact that Team Gai was the back-up, Sakura was glad. It was extra man power, and it meant there would be eleven people to fight the Akatsuki and to make sure her four gennin stayed well out of the fight. It was worth it even if she had to deal with the awkward atmosphere that came with her, Neji, and Tenten being in the same space.

The large group took no time to rest. Naruto, during his time training with Jiraiya, had learned that the demon extraction technique took three days. They had already wasted a day and a half, and night was drawing near. They survived on soldier pills and chakra pills. They were last resources normally, but if they were to have any chance of saving Gaara, they had to take them. Konohamaru, Moegi, Udon, and Hanabi were eating them like candy. Their reserves weren’t as vast as the rest of the group and therefore needed them more often.

They pressed on through the night.

It was in the early hours of the third day that they ran into trouble.

They entered a clearing and found two figures shrouded in black cloaks decorated with red clouds.

Akatsuki.

The one figure towered over his partner, and Sakura knew immediately who they were facing. Kisame Hoshigaki, the Monster Hidden in the Mist, a former swordsman from Kirigakure’s Seven Ninja Swordsman of the Mist, and Tobi, who she knew next to nothing about, only that he wore an orange swirled mask with a hole for one eye and had a childish disposition and a tendency to talk in third person.
Even if Tobi wasn’t the greatest fighter, as she was lead to believe by the lack of knowledge about him, Kisame was more than enough for them.

Sakura signaled at her gennins. There was no hesitation from them. They instantly jumped back and prepared to flee back through the trees to Suna.

Suddenly there was only one Akatsuki standing in front of them. Tobi had disappeared.

“Playing hide and seek are we, little gennins? Tobi wants to play too. You hide and Tobi will seek you out and Tobi will kill you when Tobi finds you.” Tobi giggled.

Sakura whirled around. Tobi was blocking her team’s retreat, and he had no plans to let them get away. Fear caught in her throat. Why was he targeting the gennins? Were they going to die?

No. Sakura would not let him hurt her students. She would die before she let her comrades die. With a vicious snarl she launched her fist at the ground. The earth quaked and shook. Only the Akatsuki were caught off guard. Naruto, luckily, had seen her smash the ground during the bell test to reveal Kakashi who had hid underneath.

Tobi laughed delightedly, focusing his one eyed gaze on the pink haired female. “Tobi thinks he is going to have fun!”

‘I’ll show him fun.’ Sakura fumed. She threw three kunai, with poisoned senbon hidden in the kunais’ shadow, and watched amazed as the Akatsuki didn’t make any move to dodge or block the weapons. He just stood there as they phased harmlessly through him, landed with a thud in a tree behind him.

Sakura froze. Her projectiles had gone right through him. How was she supposed to fight an enemy she couldn’t touch?

Sai, who always fought beside her, released an army of ink animals. Countless claws, fangs, and swipes from large paws went right through flesh as if it didn’t exist. Tobi had leapt to a crouched perch on a tree branch and laughed as the pair tried to land a hit on him.

Sakura had never seen a jutsu like this. How were they supposed to counter this? Tobi was capable of making his body intangible somehow, and as long as he could do that, they couldn’t touch him. She didn’t know what she was supposed to do. She ushered her terrified students behind her and Sai, placing them in the middle of the Kazekage rescue party. Hopefully, they could fend them off long enough that the Akatsuki disengaged.

Behind her, the rest of the team seemed to be having similar trouble with Kisame. Not that he was also capable of making his body intangible, they would be doomed if he could, but they were not able to touch him either.

Kisame wield his gargantuan sword with ease, like he was swinging around a stick and not a sword that must weigh a hundred pounds. They were having no luck getting anywhere near him, for fear that he would catch them with Samehada. Samehada meant “shark skin”, and underneath the wrapping Sakura was willing to be there was a reason it bore that name. It had been described as the most terrifying of all the Seven Swordsmen’s blades with its ability to devour an opponent’s chakra.

They were at a stalemate. The Konoha and lone Suna shinobi couldn’t get near enough to hinder either Akatsuki member, but oddly enough, neither one was attacking, only defending.

Sakura found an unwanted answer for their peculiar behavior an hour later. The two S-rank missing nins abruptly disengaged and withdrew from the battle. Kisame laughed.
“You’re too late, leaf ninja. Shukaku’s extraction is complete. Your precious Kazekage is dead.”
He grinned widely, showing off a mouthful of pointed teeth like a shark.

“LIAR! GAARA’S NOT DEAD!”

“Why don’t you see for yourself, Kyuubi.”

Sakura saw red. They only saw her friend as the beast he held caged inside him. Naruto was nothing but a demon to them. A means to an end. He wasn’t a human, but the Kyuubi himself. It made Sakura so mad.

Naruto had to be restrained by Kakashi-sensei. His eyes had bled red as the Kyuubi’s chakra covered him like a second skin. Kakashi flinched minutely as the demon fox’s chakra burned. Naruto noticed this and wrrenched himself out of his sensei’s grip, the red chakra disappearing as fast as it came.

In the commotion of Naruto nearly losing control, both Akatsuki had fled. That’s when Sakura realized that the two were acting as a diversion. They distracted the rescue party, delaying them until it was too late to save the Kazekage. They came and ruffled feathers, drawing them into a battle they had no chance of winning to buy time for the rest of the Akatsuki to finish extracting the Shukaku from Gaara.

And they succeeded. Gaara was dead. They had failed.

Tears pooled in Naruto’s eyes. “He’s lying. Gaara can’t be dead.”

“We’ll see, Naruto. Let’s keep moving.”

The blonde nodded grimly. The column was reforming just as Team Gai caught up. Kakashi quickly folded them into the group and briefed them as they got back on track. The party of fifteen now silently followed Pakkun.

Soon they came upon the Akatsuki’s hideout. They were hidden in a large above ground cave, surrounded by the forest and a river. A large rock blocked the cave’s entrance. It was also protected by a barrier generated by five forbidden tags.

Kakashi had Neji locate the other four tags and assigned Team Gai to tear them down and disable the barrier. Team Gai found and removed the tags easily, but were unable to return due to a jutsu that forced them to fight a copy of themselves.

Sakura pulled on her leather gloves, a gift from her parents when she started training with Tsunade, and cocked her right arm. When Kakashi ripped off the seal on the door and leapt away, she charged. Her fist connected, and the rock shattered. She was surprised when she was suddenly pulled back.

Chiyo nodded at her, and Sakura returned. She didn’t think the old lady had cared about anyone besides her grandson.

Hanabi, Udon, Konohamaru, and Moegi remained outside while the rest cautiously entered the Akatsuki’s hideout, where they were greeted with an unpleasant site.

Naruto cried in outrage. A blonde haired Akatsuki, that Sakura though had a striking resemblance to Ino hair wise, was sitting on Gaara. On Gaara’s body, actually. Sakura could see that Kisame had not been lying. The Kazekage was dead.
“We’ll, which one of you is the Jinchuuriki?”

“You bastards! I’ll crush you to pieces!” Naruto yelled.

“That one, it seems.”

“Give him back.” Naruto said softly, dangerously. “GIVE GAARA BACK! YOU BASTARDS!”

Unbelievably, the two Akatsuki starting arguing over who was going to capture the Kyuubi Jinchuuriki and true are. How did art even become relevant?

Naruto tried to attack them, but Sasori blocked it without even looking. The Akatsuki continued their argument as if they weren’t outnumbered.

The blonde created a giant clay bird, which scooped up Gaara’s body in its mouth so that only half of a leg was visible. The blonde leapt on top and directed the bird out of the cave.

The Kyuubi’s chakra bubbled around Naruto, taking on the shape of a fox with two tails. He chased after the Akatsuki that had taken Gaara’s body and was followed by Kakashi, Yamato, and Sasuke. If Sakura was concerned about her own inevitable battle with a renowned puppet master, she would have laughed at the overkill that was hunting down the blonde.

Sasori’s tail flicked to the side, breaking the silence. And the battle began.

Chiyo moved forward, unrolling a summoning scroll and releasing a string of kunai. He deflected the kunai with his tail.

“I don’t understand,” Sakura said. “I know that’s not his real body, but where is he? Don’t puppet masters control their puppets from behind with chakra threads?”

“His real body is on the inside.” The old lady answered. Sakura shot her a look from the corner of her eyes. She had seen Kankuro use a similar technique during the preliminaries of the chuunin exam, but she thought that had been a specific jutsu, almost like a replacement to switch the places of the puppet and the puppet master. She hadn’t realized that puppets could be controlled from within.

“Because they’re open to attack when controlling puppets, puppeteers are weak in close combat. So, that puppet circumvents that weakness. The puppet becomes the armor. And it also becomes a weapon. That’s Sasori’s favorite puppet, Hiruko. I know it well.

“First off, we need to get Sasori out of Hiruko if we want to be able to do anything. The most terrifying thing about puppets are the unpredictable traps, mechanisms that they can launch from anywhere.”

Sakura could understand that fear. That was what had nearly gotten Kankuro killed. It was hard and dangerous to fight the unpredictable. It made it harder to go on the offensive, but too dangerous to sit back and only play defensively. Constant vigilance was needed or one of those nasty traps would get her.

“But Chiyo-baa-san, aren’t you familiar with puppets yourself?” Sai asked.

“Yes, years ago. I have long since retired. It has been a long time since I’ve fought, and longer still since I had last seen this puppet. The shape’s slightly different to the Hiruko I knew long ago. Firstly, that shell on his back wasn’t there before. And that must have strengthened his defense. I’ve also never seen that left hand before.”
Sakura studied the hand in question. It actually looked very similar to the one she had seen Dosu wearing in the Forest of Death, and she was willing to bet it had a similar purpose. Although given Sasori’s love of poison, it probably released poison instead of air.

“Furthermore,” Chiyo continued, “he might have redesigned his most important traps. Sakura, you have the same superhuman strength as Tsunade. That should be able to break through Hiruko’s shell. You have to get close to him and smash the puppet. Sai and I will distract him.”

“You’re finally ready. You know I hate to be kept waiting.” Sasori growled. “Not that it will do you any good. Making plans in front of the enemy is pointless.”

Yeah, Sakura could see that. But they had to coordinate an attack. She thought the more pressing question was why did he let them make their plans? Why did he wait for them when he could have taken the advantage and attacked first?

“Relax, Block Head, we’ll kill you quickly.”

Sakura had to repress a snort. Only Sai, and Naruto actually, would insult an S-rank shinobi capable of killing them before they had even seen him move. Although, Sai’s insult seemed to have irritated the puppeteer if the rapid, angry flick of the tail was anything to go by.

The females charged while Sai opened a scroll and began to draw. Hiruko’s mouth dropped open, and a smaller portion of the bottom jaw lowered even further. Sakura could see a metal tube before senbon started flying. Sakura flipped onto her hands, twisting her torso left and lowering her left leg parallel to the floor. She pushed off, clearing the stream of senbon, and slid to the left, braced by one hand, as Hiruko’s left arm was detached and launched between her and Chiyo.

The largest lion she had seen Sai make swallowed the arm. Sakura stood. Just as she straightened the lion exploded in a shower of ink and the dozen wooden pegs she had seen embedded in the arm released a second wave of senbon dripping with purple poison. Apparently being eaten didn’t stop Sasori from being able to deploy his weapons.

The three of them duck, dodged, and weaved, expertly avoiding the rain of needles. At this point, Sakura was only feet away from the puppet. She pulled her right arm back as Hiruko’s tail swung around towards her. Another of her boyfriend’s lions pounced on the tail. It didn’t stop the tail for long, but Chiyo’s attached chakra thread did.

The tail’s poisonous point was stopped mere inches from Sakura’s face. The pinkette ran right by it and slammed her fist right into the center of Hiruko’s shield as Sasori cursed Chiyo.

A third lion slipped between Sakura’s legs and bore her away from the destroyed puppet as a black shape leapt from the ruins.

“Do you really think it will be that easy to defeat me, Granny Chiyo?”

Sakura stared open mouthed. It was unbelievable how young Sasori looked. He appeared to be the same age as her. His hair was short and as red as Gaara’s. He had half closed brown eyes and was cloaked in another red cloud patterned cloak.

“He hasn’t aged at all.” Chiyo’s voice was horrified.

Sakura shot her a pointed look. How could he not have aged? How long ago did he become rogue that she was expecting changes to his appearance?

A scroll dropped into Sasori’s right hand. “I’ll show you what I brought along. Killing him for my
collection gave me a hard time indeed.” The scroll rolled open, displaying the kanji for the number three. “That’s why I like him the best.”

“That is the Sandaime Kazekage!”

Sasori dropped into a crouch, straightening his left arm out to his side with fingers pointed back, and behind his right arm at the elbow in front of him. A puppet that could only be of the Third Kazekage according to Chiyo, hovered over him, almost lying on top of Sasori.

“Let us begin.”

“Sasori. How could you? It has been over ten years since the Sandaime Kazekage disappeared. You led Orochimaru to the Yondaime Kazekage, and now you’ve killed the Godaime Kazekage.”

Sakura’s brain felt like it was working in overdrive. This man had killed three Kazekages, three shinobis that were supposed to be the strongest in the village. Sasori had fought and murdered three of them. How were she, Sai, and Chiyo supposed to kill him?

Sasori sent the Third Kazakage flying at them. His right hand unsheathed five blades and swung at Sakura, who was still retreating. Sakura thought she was going to die. Those blades looked like they were going to rip right through her, but the lion jumped beneath her, and the poisoned blades passed through the ink animal like butter, disrupting the jutsu and leaving Sakura unharmed.

Sasori’s hands moved again. “Let’s do this, Chiyo.” The joints on the puppet’s left arm sprung open, revealing seals. Hundreds of arms shot out from the seals, arching high into the air and jabbing down above Sakura.

Sakura felt it when Chiyo attached chakra strings to her shoulders, arms and legs, and let the older woman move her like a puppet and avoid getting hit. She was sprawled on the ground, bent unnaturally. When the arms stopped moving Chiyo pulled her out, setting her down between her and Sai.

A single tube appeared between the many hands. A cloud of purple gas spilled out, accumulating quickly and spreading faster. The three sprang apart in different directions. Sakura got the distinct feeling that Sasori was targeting her.

“Sakura, Sai, don’t take a single breath!”

Sakura barely had time to realize that this was Sasori’s unique poison when she was restrained. Kunai attached to rope had wrapped around her. One, binding her arms to her sides, and the other around her calves. She couldn’t move. She bit her lip, struggling not to breathe. Her lungs felt like they might burst.

‘Just a little more,’ she thought, twisting her arm to reach into her weapons pouch.

“Sakura!” she heard Sai yelled, panicked.

She withdrew a kunai with a paper boom attached. With a quick hand sign, the seal exploded, dispersing the poison. Unfortunately, Sakura caught the brunt of the explosion. She kept from screaming as she was thrown back. Sai dropped his scroll and brush to catch her.

“Are you alright, Sakura?” he asked, holding her gently in his lap.

She stood with hands on knees panting. “I’m fine, Sai. Promise.” She glared at Sasori from beneath her bangs. He looked a mixture of surprised and frustrated at her escape from his trap.
“I’ll get you!” Sakura yelled, startling Sai and Chiyo. “Even if you blow off my arms and legs, if I take in your poison and it paralyzes me, I’ll get you. I swear it! No matter how much you resist! No matter what you do! I’ll beat you half to death! Got it?!”

“Let’s test that, shall we?”

A barrage of kunai flew from between the arms. Sakura dropped to the ground. The kunai thudded into the ground in front of her. Sakura looked up to see Chiyo standing over her, holding two scrolls from which the puppets defending her must have come from.

The two puppets touch hands, wires attached between them. They pulled their hands apart and tore through the arms, slicing it to pieces, and then tried to cut the Sandaime Kazekage. The battle escalated, blades popped out of hidden compartments and fingers flew and puppets blurred as the two puppet masters fought. Sakura could only watch amazed at how fast the two puppeteers moved and reacted.

Sasori and Chiyo pulled back their puppets. “Shall I get serious?”

It was a rhetorical question. The Third Kazekage’s jaw dropped open. What looked like black sand floated and writhed in front of the puppet.

“So that puppet uses the Sandaime’s jutsu.”

Sakura was startled. The puppet was using jutsus? How was that possible?

“The most feared weapon in the sand. The Iron Sand. The Sandaime created it himself. It can be changed into any form and weapons to suit the situation created. Sandaime Kazekage was born with an ability to change chakra into a magnetic force.”

“But it’s just a puppet!” Sakura protested. “Why would an inanimate puppet have chakra?”

“No, it’s a human puppet created originally from a living body, thus, it’s made to contain the chakra from a previous life.”

Sakura had never heard of human puppets. It wasn’t surprising. Puppetry wasn’t common in Konoha, more so in Suna. But if Sasori was capable of making puppets from humans, was is possible that he had done the same with his own body? She thought that it would explain why Chiyo said he had not aged a day since he left. But if he did turn his own body into a puppet, it made it that much harder to kill him. As long as he had chakra, he could piece together his puppet again and again, each time it was destroyed.

“Satetsu Shigure!”

The iron sand formed into thousands of rock sized projectiles, and they moved faster than Sakura anticipated.

She grunted as the female puppet Chiyo had used earlier slammed into her side, shielding her. When the dust cleared she could see that the male puppet had shielded Sai. She looked worriedly for Chiyo, wondering how the old lady had protected herself if she used her two puppets to shield the leaf ninja. She was surprised to see a chakra shield in front of her. One of Chiyo’s arms was also a puppet. The arm had opened at the elbow, and the four panels that created the form arm created a chakra barrier.

The arm clanked to the ground. “It’s useless not that the Iron Sand has gotten inside the mechanism.”
Sakura staggered to her feet.

“Now all aim for all three of you at the same time. Someone has to die.” The iron sand shifted shapes into giant spears, several floating above each person. “There are only two puppets. There’s no way you can all be blocked. Which of you will die?”

Dirt clouded her vision as rocks exploded from the force of the sand’s impacted. Sakura coughed, trying to expel the dirt from her lungs. Her vision cleared. She could see that Sai was fine. Both puppets that had been protecting them were now useless. She could see the black sand that was crawling through the puppets. She search frantically for the old lady that was growing on her, and sighed in relief when she found her, only to gasp when she realized Chiyo was unconscious.

She desperately wanted to check on Chiyo and see if the woman was still alive, but Sakura didn’t have the time. The Iron Sand was pooling into two large shapes, a pyramid and a rectangle, and forming wings on the back of the Sandaime Kazekage.

Sakura was totally blindsided when the next attack came not from Sasori, but Sai.

She yelped as she punched the ink tiger. “Sai! What are you doing?”

“I am merely following orders, Ugly.”

Sakura clenched her jaw, both at the nickname, which now didn’t seem like much of a pet name that meant he actually thought her beautiful as it did a derisive insult as he sneered it, and at the idea that someone had order him to kill her and he was listening.

“Who’s orders?” Although she already knew, she wanted to hear it from him.

He cocked his head. “Danzou-sama’s of course. You have become a threat to Root. Danzou needs you out of the way. It was always my mission to kill you, this is just convenient. Everyone will believe that you got cocky, trying to take down a third member of the Akatsuki, and that this time it was you who died.”

“Danzou’s, eh.” Sasori interrupted. “My spy wants you dead, little girl? You have done more damage to us than him. Why does he want you dead?”

‘Danzou is Sasori’s spy!? And what is Root?’

Sasori’s words startled her so badly that Sai’s next attack, his ink flush technique, a jutsu in which he formed the animals directly from poured ink, trapped her in a writhing nest of snakes. The more she struggled the tighter the wound around her, until she thought they might stop her breathing.

Sai walked calmly over to her, his face as mask as always. It pained Sakura to see that he didn’t care that he was about to kill. He had never cared for her at all. He had dated her in order to get closer to her, to gain her trust. She trusted Sai with her life, and therefore never thought that she would have to defend herself against him.

She was paying for that trust now. She couldn’t believe she stupidly fell in love with him. Sakura knew that Danzou had placed Sai on their team for a reason. She was foolish to forget that, foolish to let him get so close to her, foolish to let him in her heart.

He gripped his tanto tightly, pushing the tip just into the skin above her heart.

Sakura took as deep a breath as she could get with the snakes still coiled around her. In one move, she simultaneously enhanced every muscle in her body with chakra and shoved against the snakes restraining her. She used that momentum and her moment of surprise to wrestle away Sai’s tanto.
and slam the hilt into the side of his head, taking care not to bash in his skull.

Sakura frowned at him as he crumpled. She had never thought that Sai would turn on her. She never beat him that easily either. He had used that technique on her before and she had broken out of it every time. After the first time, he kept his distance.

A sudden idea left her short of breath and sent her staggering. Maybe Sai had not wanted to kill her after all. Maybe he had intentionally drawn his tanto and gotten closer because he knew she would break out of his technique. He had let her know that Danzou was a traitor, and involved with something called Root.

“Well, that was disappointing. You are proving to be very difficult to kill, little girl. You are quite annoying. It will be gratifying to kill you personally.”

Sakura slammed her fists together.

“This again. . . useless.”

Sakura charged. She jumped back as the pyramid compacted and sliced in front of her, continue up and around and cutting through the wall of the caverns. She had to through herself to the right when the rectangle came at her from above.

She bent one knee and used it to push herself towards the block of iron sand. A chakra enhanced fist slammed into the side, sending it rocketing to the other side where it slammed into the opposite wall, where the resulting shaking brought down the roof of the cave. Sakura took the opportunity that Sasori stood staring at his weapon to use the Water Release: Archerfish jutsu to shoot a stream of water at the sand.

The water did not have the effect she was looking for. It did nothing to weigh down the iron sand.

Sakura panted as she thought to herself. ‘Before he attacks, the user always moves his fingers. That’s the weakness of puppeteer’s. . . and from the pattern of his hand and arm movements, I can start to tell the direction of his attack.’

Sakura tensed her muscles when his fingers flicked, but this time it wasn’t aimed at her. The two figures of iron sand collided. For a minute, Sakura was unsure what Sasori was planning, then an absolute maze of sand exploded in every direction.

“Satetsu Kaihou!”

‘It’s going everywhere!’ Sakura knew that even with her skill in evasion and predicting the enemy’s next move that she could not entirely avoid this next attack. The best she could do was to minimize the damage.

One scratched the right side of her face. Two more crossed her right shoulder. Another just above her right elbow. She was cut on her left shoulder, and upper and lower arm. There were more cuts in the gap between her spandex shorts and her over the knee high boots.

For a few seconds, the only sound that could be heard was the splat of her blood hitting the ground. Sakura swayed, clutching her right arm, and fell to her knees, and then dropping completely on her front.

Sasori chuckled. “The poison’s effective. The body instantly becomes numb and immobile. If left alone, you would have three days, but. . . I have no intention of leaving you alone. I hate waiting, especially waiting for someone to die.”
Sakura waited with bated breath. She could hear the Third Kazekage flying towards her, and she heard when he unsheathed another pair of blades. She forced her body to remain limp, while discretely injecting herself with one of the two antidotes she had brought with her.

At the last second, the rosette stood on her knees. The puppet of the Sandaime Kazekage met its end at her fist. The puppet shattered, wood cracking and clattering to the ground. And with the puppet destroyed, Sasori’s control of the Iron Sand died with it. It fell to the ground with a soft hiss.

‘I have to finish this fast. The antidote will only work for three minutes. In that time, no matter how much poison I get, the effects of the antidote will turn it into harmless protein. I have one more, but now that Sasori’s knows, I don’t want to use it if I don’t have to.’

She put her hands together forming the tiger seal, with her first three fingers straight and the last two laced.

-ANBU-

‘Impossible!’ Sasori thought. ‘How can she move? She should have been caught by my poison. Did she use an antidote? Impossible.’

He thought of the puppet wielding sand ninja he had left alive. ‘Did she use that poison then to. . . no. . . no chance. When mixing an antidote, not even a hairline mistake is allowed. . . even I who made the poison would need a detailed recipe of the mixture proportions.’

He watched as the pink haired brat began healing the cuts his Iron Sand World Method had inflicted. ‘So she’s a medical ninja, too.’ His eyes widened. ‘No way she. . .’

-ANBU-

Sakura ended her Mystical Palm technique. ‘At any rate, I’ve stopped the blood in the big wounds. . . I have to focus all of my leftover chakra into attacking! This has to be decided in three minutes or it’s over!’

Sakura was well aware of her limits. Even after three years of training, she didn’t have the chakra reserves some of her friends had. She knew she was running low and that if she was going to end this, she had to do it soon.

“I’ll acknowledge that you’re a brat to be reckoned with. . . that you took out Sandaime Kazekage. . . at this point, using another human puppet would be useless.”

Sakura watched entranced as Sasori undid the buttons on his black and red signature cloak. “It’s been a long time. . . since I’ve used myself.”

The cloaked dropped to the floor, revealing Sasori’s true body. Despite the large five blades that attached to propellers on his lower back, the open compartment where his intestines should be that housed a thick coiled cable, and the out of place thing where his heart should be, the first thing Sakura noticed was how much wider his eyes were as a puppet and how that made him look insane.

Sasori stood on the cable, glaring at her from under a fringe of red hair.

Sakura didn’t have time to congratulate herself for realize much earlier that Sasori had turned himself into a human puppet. She had to duck behind a fallen rock as fire spewed from pipes in his palms. Even behind the rock she could feel the intense heat of the flames.
Suddenly the flames stopped. The coiled cable shot at her, and she didn’t have enough warning to get out of the way completely. It sliced through her right side, just under her breast, and impacted into the rock behind her.

Sasori used it to pull himself towards her, blades whirling. Wincing, she grabbed the cable, jerking it to the side and throwing Sasori off his projected path. With a great yank she pulled back, forcing him to come at her. She punched him.

She smiled as he fell apart. She had done it, and just in time too.

There was a click behind her. Sakura turned around slowly, not wanting to believe it. Sasori was putting his body back together.

“They say that the strength of a puppeteer is measured by the amount of puppets they use.” He attached a chakra thread to a scroll on his back. He pulled it forward letting it roll open as he opened a compartment on his chest. Chakra threads explode from the opening. The light was blocked as the sky filled with more puppets than Sakura could count. “With this, I took down a country!”

Mockingly, Sasori held his head. “How will I explain this? How long it took me to take down a little girl? That I even had to take out my last trick. Aka Higi: Hyakki No Souen! I will show you this power.”

Sakura craned her neck to stare at what must be a hundred puppets. She was scared. This was not odds she wanted to fight, especially not that the first antidote wore off. She was saving the other one for when she finished this battle, so that she would have the time she need to withdraw the poison, but it didn’t look like there would be an after the battle for her.

She straightened her stance, pulling her gloves on tighter. She could not afford to think like that. She had a team of gennins waiting for her. She was the medic of the team. The medic was not supposed to die. This was going to be harder than her evasion training with Tsunade-shishou when she first started, but she could not die here.

“Surrender. . . and I will grant you eternal life. You shall become one of my puppets. I would have use of you. You would make a beautiful puppet, remaining eternally beautiful.” He offered.

“Yin Seal: Release!”

It was a last resort. The Creation Rebirth Jutsu would heal the poison in her system and automatically heal any injuries she was about to receive. Sakura was uncertain how long she could maintain this jutsu.

A swarm of puppets cloaked in black descended on her. Not wanting to waste any of her chakra, Sakura kept to taijutsu, punching and kicking and whirling and twirling through puppets. Every fist that connected, every boot that hit wood, sent puppet pieces scattering. And for every puppet she destroyed, two more stood in its place.

Her body was fighting on autopilot. She barely registered her wounds before they were healed. She continued to fend off the horde of puppets. She attached a paper bomb to one and pushed him aside, letting him turn six other puppets to ash. Her fist went through one’s head. There was no pause.

Her mind was occupied on Sasori. He had chakra. He could only wield and shape chakra if he was alive. That meant some part of his wooden body had to be alive. Sakura believed it was the cylinder in his chest.
She was so busy fighting the puppets that she wasn’t paying attention to Sasori’s movements. When he slipped between the mass of black she didn’t see it. When she noticed him it was too late. He had stabbed her in the stomach with a poisoned blade.

Sakura gasped, stilling. Sasori stopped his puppets, grinning psychotically as her watched her slowly wrap her hands around the sword, gasping and panting, struggling to draw in breath as the poison tried to affect her.

Up close, Sakura could see that the cylinder in his chest had the kanji for core on it. It was the only living part of Sasori’s body, and it was the part she needed to destroy.

Sakura needed to hurry. She used a little chakra to stop the bleeding. While the sword was still in her, her Creation Rebirth technique could not heal her, so she needed to stop herself from bleeding out. It was a slow process, while not paralyzing her; the poison was making it difficult to control her chakra. It reacted sluggishly, like she was a green gennin just learning that chakra control was possible.

Sasori made to pull back. Sakura fisted her hands, not caring as the blade sliced into her palms.

“What?”

“Not so fast.”

Sakura stopped trying to fight the poison. She focused her chakra into her right hand, forming a chakra scalpel. She used the other to pull the sword further into her, forcing Sasori, who was still hold the hilt, to come closer.

He unhinged his right arm at the elbow, but it wasn’t fast enough. Sakura’s right hand came up, and with the precision of a medical ninja she had thrust her chakra scalpel into his core.

Sasori’s eyes widened. He fell lifelessly to the ground. With the controller dead, the remaining puppet army clattered to the ground.

Sakura’s eyes drooped. Her eyelids felt so heavy. She was so dizzy. She swayed and pitched forward. She fell into someone’s arms.

With great effort, Sakura forced her eyes open. “Itachi?” She whispered. “What are you doing here?”

“That can wait, Sakura. Is there anything I can do to help you? I have knowledge of basic medical ninjutsu.”

“The sword.”

Itachi glanced down. He would never understand how he had missed the sword sticking through her abdomen. Later he would say that he was in such a rush to catch her that he did not bother to take in his surroundings.

Although Sakura did not twitch as he removed the sword, Itachi did. And he was horrified by the purple liquid dripping off the tip. “Sakura, is this poisoned?”


Itachi overturned said pouch, quickly grabbing the vial of antidote and placing it in the pinkette’s waiting hand.
With his help, Sakura directed her hand to her thigh and injected the antidote. She could feel it as the antidote started working immediately, turning the heavy metal based poison, which intruded muscles and killed healthy cells, into protein.

Sakura had Itachi help her into a sitting position. Now that she had the antidote in her system, the Creation Rebirth would heal all damage. All she had to do was extract the poison. She explained the procedure to Itachi. With one of the water jutsus he had copied, he created an orb of water that she could use, and then restrained her with against his chest.

Sakura screamed as she forced the water in, nearly losing control of her jutsu. She mentally shook her head. This jutsu required extreme precision. She ignored the pain. She repeated the technique until the water came out clean.

“That’s enough, Itachi, I’m finished.”

The ANBU captain released his hold on the girl. “Can you stand?”

Sakura stood in response. The Uchiha gave her a small grin. “Come.”

“Wait. What about Chiyo-sama and Sai?”

Sakura let Itachi carry Sai while she took Chiyo. She was unsure how she felt about him. Had he really tried to kill her, or was it an elaborate ruse so he could give her that information. Either way, he had at least acted like he was going to kill her, so she didn’t want to be near him.

She regrouped with her gennins and Team Gai a mile from the hideout, where Genma was waiting for them. Shisui, being the fastest on the team, had gone after Team Kakashi. She was swarmed by four worried gennins, talking over each other and trying to see if she was alright. Sakura reassured them that she was fine and used the last of her chakra to heal Chiyo. She would not wake immediately, but she would live.

“You never did answer my question, Itachi. What are you guys doing here?”

It was Genma that answered. “Lady Tsunade received a message from you guys. Said you had a run in with at least two Akatsuki and were expecting more. As soon as we returned from our mission she sent us after you.”

“She did? Who sent it?”

“I did, Sakura-sensei.”

The pink haired kunoichi turned to face her youngest gennin. “I could see two different Akatsuki from the ones we had already encountered inside the cave, so I sent a request for more back up.” Hanabi explained.

“You did well, Hanabi.” She said, ruffling the girl’s long hair.

Shisui and Team Kakashi returned quickly. Kakashi gave a brief recap of their fight, more of a chase after Deidara which ended in their distracting him so that Naruto could free Gaara and Kakashi could use his Sharingan on him, and congratulated Sakura on her single handed victory over Sasori.

Even with the extra man power, no one was comfortable hanging around a known Akatsuki hideout. Much to Kakashi’s horror, Gai offered to carry him. Naruto kept a tight hold on Gaara, Itachi still had Sai, Genma took Chiyo from her, see as she was ready to collapse, and Shisui swept her onto his back.
Any other time Sakura would have complained, insisting that she could run by herself, but this time she was more than glad to let someone carry her.

The group of nineteen stopped in a grassy clearing. By this point Chiyo had awoken. Both her and Sakura moved over to Naruto, gently pulling Gaara from his arms so Sakura could examine him.

“Sakura-chan?”

Sakura shook her head, eyes squeezing shut.

“Can’t your rebirth jutsu heal him?”

“I’m sorry, Naruto” she said softly. She knew he was grasping at straws, desperately hoping that Gaara was not dead, that he could still be saved. “I can’t revive the dead.”

Naruto started shaking, tears sliding freely down his cheeks. “Why Gaara? Why always Gaara? To die like this. . . He’s the Kazekage. . .he didn’t just become Kazekage. . .”

“Calm down, Naruto.”

“SHUT UP!” Naruto yelled at Chiyo. “If you shinobi of the sand hadn’t put a monster in Gaara, then nothing like this would have happened! Did any of you even try to ask how Gaara felt? What is this “Jinchuuriki” anyway? You just arrogantly made up that word to call them!”

Naruto started crying noisily. “I couldn’t save Gaara. For three years I’ve desperately trained, but nothing’s changed.”

Chiyo knelt next to Gaara’s body, laying both hands on his chest. Her hands glowed blue.

“Chiyo-sama, that jutsu, what is it?”

“This is Kishou Tensei, a reincarnation jutsu. It exchanges the users life force to the target, restoring him to life. In exchange for my life, I can bring Gaara back” Her chakra flickered.

‘She’s exchanging her life for Gaara’s!’

“Not enough chakra.” Naruto dropped to his knees on the other side of Gaara.

“My chakra! Try using it! Can you really do that, baa-chan?”

Chiyo told him to place his hands on top of hers, letting her use his chakra to power her jutsu. “In this world of shinobi made by many foolish old people, I’m glad to see that someone such as yourself had appeared. The future, starting now, will surely be different from the time I lived. Naruto, you are the only person capable of understanding Gaara’s suffering. . . Gaara understands your suffering, as well. . . please help Gaara for me.”

Naruto grabbed Gaara’s hand. “I promise.”

“Naruto.” Gaara muttered. He stared around him, clearly surprised by the number of people. Many shinobi of Suna had shown up while Chiyo had been using her reincarnation jutsu.

“Everyone came running to save you.”

Temari shoved her way up to Gaara’s side, pushing Naruto aside. “Gaara. . . how are you feeling?”
Her brother struggled to stand. “You shouldn’t be in such a hurry to move. You’re body’s not back to full health yet.”

“Thank you, Naruto.”

The blonde shook his head slightly, angling it towards Chiyo. “You should be saying that to the old lady, not me. She saved you with her tensei ninjutsu.”

-ANBU-

The squadron of Konoha ninja remained in sand for Chiyo’s funeral, three days later.

Itachi had pulled her aside in that time, much to the jealousy of his younger brother, who had been trying to brag about his part in bringing down Deidara.

“Did you need something, Itachi?”

“I want you to join ANBU.”

“ANBU?” She choked at his bluntness. “I’m only fifteen. I’m not skilled enough to be ANBU!”

“Don’t patronize yourself, Sakura. I saw the end of your battle with Sasori, and the Hyuuga boy described the rest to me. That is the third Akatsuki you’ve killed.”

“But, ANBU?”

“Your skills would be put to great use in ANBU.” He replied.

“But what about my students?”

“They can be reassigned.”

Sakura slapped him. “I know you’ve never taught a team of gennin before Itachi, but one does not simply reassign a team. They were given to me specifically because I could help them grow like no other.”

Itachi rubbed his reddening check. “I apologize, Sakura. I only meant to suggest that you might wish to join. I do not mean to push you or force you to quit as a sensei.”

“Maybe after they become chunnin.”

The Uchiha inclined his head. “If that is your wish. Perhaps I could train you for the exams?”

Sakura gladly accepted. She knew it would be tough; she already had proof that Itachi Uchiha was a harsh task master, but it would be well worth it. If, in the end, she decided to rise in rank, she would be prepared, and if she did not, she would still be one of the strongest kunoichi in the Leaf Village.

Itachi wasn’t the only one that wanted her to sign up. Shisui sidled up to her when he caught her alone, asking if she had agreed to Itachi’s proposal.

It gave her some serious thought. Itachi’s team was the strongest ANBU team currently, and all three of its members clearly believed her capable of being one of them. Shisui had let it slip that Itachi wanted her to join his team specifically, and that the Hokage had seemed agreeable to the idea. That had really surprised Sakura. She hadn’t known her shishou was thinking about making her an ANBU, considering she hadn’t officially taken the jounin exams yet, although that wasn’t a requirement for ANBU. Any shinobi that felt they were ready could try their hand at the ANBU
requirement for ANBU. Any shinobi that felt they were ready could try their hand at the ANBU exams.

Either way, she did not think she would be joining anytime soon. The next chuunin exams didn’t start for another month, and while her gennin had certainly improved leaps and bounds, they might not all be promoted to chuunin, which was usually the case. Most times a whole team did not get promoted at the same time.

But that was all circumstantial. She wasn’t sure she was going to being signing her team up for the chuunin exams this year. While Kakashi had entered her team and all three of them had made it to the final round, only she had been awarded the rank of chuunin, although Naruto and Sasuke might have made it too had they not tried to fight Gaara.

So, while it could be possible for a whole team to pass their first time through, she was unsure about entering them. Even though she had done well, the chuunin exam itself was an arduous challenge that had ended in disaster.

She knew that the likelihood of another full-scale invasion on the village the exams was being hosted in was slim. Security had escalated dramatically after Sound’s attempt at her exams. But that was only part of the reason she held back.

The other reason was because she didn’t want to let them go. She had been teaching them for over half a year now. They were her students. They adored her, almost as much as they did Naruto when they had been in the Academy, not including Hanabi, and by now all four of them worshipped her. Sakura loved teaching them. She loved that she could literally watch as they grew, and she wasn’t ready for that to end.

She heaved a large sigh. She supposed that was really up to them. If they felt they were ready for the exams, she would let them try. If they passed she would be happy for them, and she would be even if it meant Sakura wasn’t their sensei anymore. If they failed she would have more time with them to make sure they definitely passed the next one.

-ANBU-

Sakura debated the pros and cons the whole journey back to Konoha. After she delivered her report to Tsunade personally, which involved a lot of swearing and throwing of empty jars of sake on the Hokage’s part over one of her Council’s treachery, she approached the topic with her gennin.

All four insisted that they wanted to participate, so she handed over the forms to be filled out and returned them completed to the Hokage.

“So, Itachi convinced you to join his team.”

“Partially.” Tsunade raised an eyebrow.

“He’s going to train me for the exams. Should my students pass the chuunin exams, I will attempt the ANBU exam.”

The Hokage nodded at the explanation, dismissing her apprentice. Sakura left, not knowing that her shishou planned to promote all four of them so that Sakura would try out for ANBU.

-ANBU-

Team 3 took no missions during the month before the chuunin exams. This was both for her benefit and for her students. Sakura did not know how she was supposed to act around Sai anymore, so she settled for staying away. They spent long hours at training ground three, learning exams.
or perfecting new techniques, attempting to strengthen their jutsu armory. Sakura introduced the chakra paper to them.

Konohamaru was a fire type, naturally, as expected as a member of the Sarutobi clan, which was known for their ash jutsus. Udon was a water user, Moegi had a slight ability for earth based ninjutsus, and Hanabi had earth nature as well.

Sakura gave them each a scroll with elemental based ninjutsu, as well as some more medical scrolls to Moegi and Hanabi, whose medical ninjutsus were really coming along.

She also drilled them extensively on teamwork, taking turns on picking who would lead them in the challenges she designed. Sakura picked the least experienced member to lead the challenge so that he or she was force to think, strategize, and learn to use the abilities that were available to their advantage and lead although they were not capable of doing what was needed.

It was amazing how much they improved in a month. When it came time to leave to Suna for the chunnin exams, it was happy coincidence that it was Sunagakure’s turn to host the exams, Sakura truly believed that her gennins would be able to take the exam by storm and pass with flying colors.

Surprisingly, she found that she did not feel that sensation of loss she had felt when the idea had first been suggested to her. After pushing them to the limits the last month, Sakura could see how much they truly grew, and was no longer disappointed that they did not need their sensei. It was proof that she had done her job well.

Sakura was excited to be going back to Suna. She hadn’t really gotten to enjoy the cultural difference the Village Hidden by Sand had to offer. And she wasn’t the only one.

Naruto had convinced Tsunade to let him enter the chunnin exams as a one man team. He didn’t care that it would be infinitely harder to complete the whole exam on his own. Naruto was determined to become chunnin because it was one step closer to his goal of Hokage.

Sakura used to be unable to see that dream. Naruto had yelled almost every day as gennins about how he was going to be the greatest Hokage the village had ever seen. She didn’t believe him. At twelve, he was immature, too childish, tending to think before he acted, running into things head on with no plan.

But three years had changed Naruto. Not only had he physically grown, but he had matured. He still maintained his innocence and his dreams, and was just as stubborn, if not more so, as the day he left, and still believed that ramen was the food for gods, but he was also different. Now, his emotions made him that much stronger. And while he still foolishly charged without think, he was capable of thinking on his feet. He had always been good at improvising, but now he was even better.

Looking at him, Sakura felt like she hadn’t actually grown much at all. It didn’t matter that she was the jounin and he was a gennin. Naruto was just so much stronger than her. He used jutsus she could even imagine, and acted like they were no big deal, like he wasn’t special because he could perform a jutsu no one else could.

It hardened her determination to try for ANBU. She had been working so harder to improve herself; she was not going to be left behind. ANBU were the elite, the best of the best.

And Sakura was going to be the best.

-ANBU-
Sakura’s second visit to Suna was not fun.

They checked in at the gate, showing their chuunin exam forms to the guard who checked them off a list of expected participants. The guard on duty gave Sakura a wary look, a look that she saw on other shinobi in the village. And it wasn’t just sand shinobi. Ninja from Kusagakure, Iwagakure, Kirigakure, and Kumogakure gave her similar looks. Like they were waiting for to lash out and attack something. The ninja from Amegakure outright glared at her.

“Ne, Sakura-chan, why are they all looking at you like that?”

Sakura nearly jumped out of her skin. Naruto was looking at her pointedly, waiting for an answer. She wondered when he had become so observant, or if he could always tell what people were thinking because of how people look at him as a child.

“I don’t know, Naruto.”

The blonde huffed, putting his arms behind his head as he continued to walk. “Well, they should stop.”

Sakura shook her head at him when he wasn’t looking. She loved him dearly, but he couldn’t change how other people acted. “Let it go, Naruto.”

Naruto did no such thing. They went to the Kazekage’s office, to inform him of their presence and to officially register Naruto and her students for the exams.

The blonde Jinchuuriki great the Kazekage with an enthusiastic hug and “GAARA! It’s good to see you. Things must be pretty hectic around here with you hosting the exams and the whole Akatsuki thing.”

Sakura could not believe that Naruto was acting like he was talking to just a friend and not the leader of a whole village.

“I am well, Naruto.”

“Good,” then the blonde’s whole demeanor changed, “Why the hell are you people staring a Sakura with fear?” he snapped.

Gaara blinked. He turned his jade eyes on her, and she fidgeted. He was the same age as her, but he seemed a lot older than fifteen as he looked at her.

“I do not know why, Naruto.”

“Then who the hell does?” Naruto raged. “It’s not right. She didn’t do anything to them.”

“It’s because she killed Sasori.”

“Tsunade-shishou!” Sakura spun around to face her Hokage, who was standing in the Kazekage’s doorway.

“Baa-chan! What are you talking about?”

“The shinobi world is starting to fear you, Sakura. You’re responsible for the deaths of three members of Akatsuki. The Akatsuki is feared, and anyone capable of killing one is someone to be reckoned with. You killed three.”

“So their afraid of her because she’s strong? That doesn’t make any sense.”
Tsunade shook her head. “It’s always the strongest shinobi that are the most feared. The ones with unheard of talents, capable of feats most ninja could even dream of. People with power are people to be feared.”

Then, as if the conversation had never happened, Tsunade sat herself down in the chair across from the Kazekage and the two started discussing the security and design of the chuunin exams.

-SAKURA-

Sakura sat in the hotel room she shared with her gennins. She had dreamed in the academy about be the strongest ninja in the village. What shinobi-in-training didn’t? As kids, they all thought they were going to be the very best.

But she had never imagined the repercussions that came with being the best. It never crossed her mind that people would ever be afraid of her. Her pink hair made it almost impossible.

But she had proof that they were. The looks she received. The bingo book she had thrown against the wall.

She didn’t need to pick it up in order to remember what it said, but she did so anyway, flipping to the page that sported her likeness. Most of the stats had not changed. But under what she was known for, Sasori’s death was now added. Her bounty had skyrocketed to 50,000,000 ryō, the highest bounty ever recorded.

Sakura found the most recent additions to be the most interesting. Her name had changed. Someone had found that she had been adopted and added Nara to her name, because it now read “Sakura Haruno Nara.” Next to her name were the words “Akatsuki’s Bane.” She was known, like Kakashi was Kakashi of the Sharingan, the Copy-Cat ninja, and the Sannin were the Sannin. She was Sakura, Akatsuki’s Bane.

Right at the bottom of the page, in big block letters, were the words FLEE ON SIGHT. The last person to have a flee on sight order was the Yondaime Hokage, during the Third Shinobi World War against Iwa. And now she had one too.

-SAKURA-

The first stage of the chuunin exams started the next day. It started later in the day, at eleven o’clock. Sakura gave her students what advice she could, based off her own experience, but also reminded them that each village’s exams were different, so they had to be prepared for anything.

As it turned out, Suna’s chuunin exams were drastically different from Konoha’s. All participating gennin were locked into a large, empty, and dangerous fenced off desert space. Sakura later learned that it was known as the Demonic Sea.

Five minutes after the exam began, she could see why. What was formerly just a vast expanse of desert with no rocks, plants, or animals in sight was suddenly crawling with bugs the size of buildings.

Gennins screamed. The Kazekage stood to explain the first test.

“At the other end of the Demonic Sea is a stadium where the final test of the chuunin exams will take place.”

Gaara’s voice carried easily, projecting over the hysteria of the gennins. “The final stage will consist of a series of one on one fights, and the winner will become a chuunin. This test is simple. You have five hours to cross the desert. If you are not within the stadium at the end of the time
limit, you fail.

“Begin.”

It explained the late start. The five hours that was the limit for crossing the desert was when the temperature reached its highest point. It was a very unfavorable condition to be fighting in. Plus, by the time the gennins reached the stadium, they would be exhausted, overheated, and probably sun burned. That would make the immediate one on one battle that much harder.

Sakura watched Naruto decimate the first test. With a joyous laugh he created a platoon of shadow clones. Some formed the spiraling sphere of chakra, one summoned Gamabunta and another toad she did not know. Gamabunta swung his sword through the bugs, and Naruto did a combined jutsu with the other toad, who spat out a stream of oil which the blonde shinobi lit on fire. Some used a sealing jutsu, which beyond shocked her; he had not said anything about his learning Fuuinjutsu.

All in all, Naruto dazzled the audience with his display, setting the record for the fastest time, just under thirteen minutes.

Naruto’s skills also stunned many of the gennin, who stood there watching his progress and not trying to cross the Demonic Sea as they were supposed.

“That’s it, Naruto-nii! Show them how it’s done! Come on guys! We have to get a move on! We can’t let Naruto-nii be the only one to pass!”

Konohamaru spurred his teammates into motion, and with the teamwork Sakura had instilled in them, they fought their way across the desert. They were in no way as flashy as Naruto, and it was impossible to more flashier than the ninja that wore orange, but they showcased their abilities and got themselves noticed.

Sakura could hear whispers of how impressive the Konoha gennins were. It made her want to burst with pride. When they reached the stadium an hour later, she let herself relax. She was confident in their abilities and was positive that they would win their battles. Her only worry was that they might end up facing each other. Although it was ultimately up to the Hokage who became a chuunin, knowing that it was guaranteed due to a victory would be a weight of her students’ shoulders.

The Suna gennin crossed the desert with relative easy, all thirty-six of them. It wasn’t entirely home field advantage, but they definitely arrived in better condition than any gennin aside from Naruto.

At the end of five hours, the stadium floor was marked with gennins. A total of sixty-seven gennins, out of a hundred and twenty-six managed to reach the stadium. The stragglers that had just managed to walk through the doors before the five hours expired were given no time to rest. The final stage of the chuunin exams started right away.

Sakura watched some pretty spectacular gennin battles, and then some that stuck to basic techniques and made her feel like she was watching academy student trains. There were some gennins that were clearly not ready for these exams, and they were beaten easily. Sakura felt that wasn’t necessarily a good thing, because their opponents might not have been the most skilled either, but would now be expected of holding to the standard of chuunins even if they didn’t have the skills because of an easy win.

Although, speaking of easy wins, the kid matched to fight Naruto fainted when Naruto was named his opponent. By default, Naruto won.
Of course, he protested, saying that he wanted to fight and that they could give him a different opponent and let the kid fight someone else. The kid was still disqualified, but Gaara allowed for a gennin to volunteer to face Naruto.

A bulky boy from Iwa swaggered to the front. Sakura could tell just by watching him that he was cocky. He was probably the strongest gennin put forth by the Hidden Stone Village.

Observing the battle, there was no doubt the kid was skilled. He had an impressive array of earth jutsus at his disposal. Unfortunately for him, he was just not in the same league as Naruto.

The blonde Jinchuuriki had surprised Sakura again. He had started with his standard clones, but two of them had retreated to the wall of the arena, sitting crossed legged and meditating while the rest fought. Sakura could not figure out their purpose. They sat unnaturally still, never moving, while the Naruto clones used Rasengan and other wind based jutsus to smash through the Iwa ninja’s rock defenses.

One of the stationary clones dispersed. The second it was gone Naruto’s features changed. His eyes turned golden, with sideways slits, and the skin around his eyes turned orange.

Whatever he had done, it made him stronger. He punched through the rock dome the Iwa kid was hiding in with his bare hand, similar to her own enhanced strength, and threw the kid across the arena. He flashed to the kid, moving as fast as Lee, and ended the battle with the Uzumaki Barrage he had first used in the preliminaries of his first chuunin exams.

“That brat learned senjutsu.” Tsunade said.

Sakura didn’t know much about senjutsu. Actually, all she knew was that the shinobi that were capable of using it were classified as Sages, or Sannins. She wondered why Tsunade had not taught her this technique. She was the Slug Sannin. Sakura vowed to ask her once they returned to Konoha and decided to read up on it some more.

Sakura watched the remainder of the battles over the course of the next three hours. Hanabi’s had been by far the longest. With a combination of her Hyuuga style taijutsu and her limited repertoire of earth jutsu, she had an almost impenetrable defense. It wasn’t perfect, but after a near half hour of trying to force her way through, her opponent surrendered. Sakura vowed to have words with her once they returned to Konoha and decided to read up on it some more.

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Konohamaru’s had been the shortest. Naruto had taught him the shadow clone jutsu before their own chuunin exams, as well as his own Sexy Jutsu, both of which Konohamaru took advantage of. He used his clan’s signature ash jutsu, to create a smokescreen. Under the cover of the cloud of ash, he made four clones and used Naruto’s Sexy Jutsu. His older opponent passed out from blood loss from a nosebleed.

Sakura mentally cursed both Naruto and Konohamaru. She couldn’t believe that Naruto had taught that ridiculous jutsu to her student and that he used it in a sanctioned spar in front of the Kages. Both were going to get a beating from her for being perverts.

Moegi and Udon had, unfortunately, been faced against each other. It had been an interesting battle to watch. As teammates, they knew the other’s strengths and weaknesses. It made it easy to predict the next possible move, and thus made the battle one that went back and forth as they switched from offensive to defensive and back. Moegi ultimately came out the victor. She surprised Udon with an earth wall that blocked his attack. He actually broke his hand on that
attack, and in shock from the pain didn’t react fast enough to block the girl’s uppercut, which rendered him unconscious.

Gaara stood once the last match had reached its conclusion. He congratulated the gennins that had won their battles and earned the rank of chuunin and informed everyone else that they were welcomed and encouraged to enjoy Suna’s hospitality and take part in the festival he had arranged to celebrate.

-AnBU-

Sakura awaited her team and Team 3’s training grounds.

Her four students raced across the clearing, each wearing the green flak vest declaring them official chuunin of Konoha. Sakura’s face broke into a grin. She was so glad that Udon had made chuunin as well.

The four preteens tackled her.

Sakura gave them her congratulations, stating how proud she was off all of them and that this was no excuse to slack off on training. Being a chuunin meant they had to work even harder. The newly promoted chuunins promised in unison and then made Sakura swear that she would not stop training them.

The rosette had laughed. “I never planned to stop your training. I still train with Kakashi-sensei and sometimes Gai-sensei. Just because you’re now chuunin doesn’t mean that you’re no longer my students. You four will always be my students. You were my first. And I’ll always be here if you need me, alright?”

After lunch, which was on her, a runner summoned her to the Hokage’s office. Sakura hurried over, already knowing what Tsunade-shishou wanted her for.

Both the Hokage and Itachi were in the office when she arrived. Sakura smiled brightly at both of them, still happy over her gennins’ success.

“Shishou.”

“Sakura, come in.” Sakura did as directed, falling into place at Itachi’s side.

“Now, I’ve summoned you here to settle the situation of you joining ANBU. Itachi had agreed to mentor you. This means a minimum of three months with his team, in which he will teach you the skills required of an ANBU. You may remain longer than three months if necessary, or you may try your hand at the ANBU test. The test can be taken multiple times, but should you fail you must wait a year before you make a second attempt. Is this what you want, Sakura?”

“Yes, Shishou.”

“Very well. Your training starts now. Get out of my office.”

-AnBU-

ANBU training was grueling. Itachi had demanded she temporarily move into the Uchiha compound so that he could maximize the amount of training they could get done in the three months. The Uchiha was under the impression that she would not need even a day over that three month minimum.

Sakura thought he was insane, but if he had that kind of belief in her, she wanted to live up to it.
So she didn’t complain.

At the start of training, Sakura came to believe that her newest mentor was a demon. For a week straight he trained her nonstop. He did not let her sleep for a week, and neither did he. The only difference was, at the end of that week, he looked unaffected by the lack of sleep and she did not.

That was also when she decided she hated the eldest Uchiha brother. He set her insane tasks to complete, and then enlisted the help of Shisui, Genma, Kakashi, Naruto, Yamato, Sasuke, Kohonamaru, Moegi, Udon, Hanabi, Shikamaru, Shikaku, and Shizune to interfere in any way they wanted. It was a nightmare.

One time, he made her walk around Konoha with a blind fold, telling her that a shinobi must always be aware of their surroundings. To make it infinitely harder, she was supposed to find, defeat, and take a scroll off of Kakashi, Shizune, and Naruto.

Sensing and finding them wasn’t the problem. She had excellent chakra control. Once she sensed their chakra she could follow them. Although that method did not work with Naruto. The blonde took the test to a whole new level. Shadow clones ran rampant through Konoha, and because they were shadow clones they all had the same chakra signature as Naruto. It would have benefited her if each clone had a copy of the scroll, but there were two problems with that. One, Naruto created the clones before he pocketed the scroll, which meant only one of the copies actually had the scroll. Two, even had each clone had a scroll, as soon as the clone was dispelled, so would have been the scroll Sakura had taken. Sakura had taken to marking the clones that did not have the scroll with her own chakra, so she would know to ignore them, and Naruto had switched up the game by passing the scroll between his clones. Simply dispelling the clones did her no good, because Naruto created an army to replace them and continued to lead her on a merry chase through the village. She wanted to tear her hair out in frustration, or hit Naruto all the way to the Land of Snow.

It was the real world that gave her a problem. Inanimate objects did not emit chakra, or have signatures of any kind, so she was constantly hitting civilians and tripping over tree roots and uneven paving and whatever else might be in the way.

Training was never the same two days in a row. Itachi had set an unpredictable schedule. One day she would be faking an assassination, and the next fencing a building that housed stolen information that she was supposed to retrieve, and the next uncomfortably learning torture techniques she prayed she never have to use. Sometimes he interrupted one training scenario and expected to her switch into another with no warning. Itachi took advantage of his many volunteers to thrust Sakura into a position of leadership on various training missions he designed, leading his team, with them as the enemy. Sakura never wanted to be Naruto’s enemy. When he was fighting seriously, he was dangerous.

It was aggravating. She was positive he wanted her to move into the compound so that he could surprise her with an assignment at any hour of the night, which he did. His excuse was ANBU were summoned when they were needed, be it the middle of the night or midafternoon, and she needed to always be ready for a summons.

He randomly started issuing a uniform check. She didn’t actually have an ANBU uniform, as it was illegal for anyone that was not an ANBU to even be in possession of one, let alone wear one, but he constantly checked the state of her gear. That was the time he decided she needed to learn to use a weapon other than her giant axe, which she was still learning to use. He set her to training with Genma with a basic katana that all ANBU carried.

This was promising to be the longest three months of her life. The time she had spent as a hostage of the cultist group praying that they didn’t realize she was a shinobi didn’t seem so bad now.
Every time she thought about quitting, Sakura had to remind herself that she knew this wasn’t going to be easy, but that the rewards would be worth it. ANBU were the ninja elite, the Special Assassination and Tactical Squad. They were both feared and respected by civilians and shinobi alike, and it was an honor to earn the tattoo. It was the ANBU that protected the village from exceptional threats, conducted high risk missions into enemy territory, and dealt with extremely strong ninjas. They were the ones responsible for carrying out assassinations, tracking, surveillance, and other missions that required specific skill sets. Being ANBU was an enormous responsibility.

Sometimes Sakura thought she was too young for such responsibility at fifteen, but she knew that was a weak excuse. Age wasn’t always a sign of maturity, and while she may be young physically, Sakura was not young mentally. Itachi had joined when he was only ten and her sensei had also joined at a young age.

Then she remembered the fear she had received from the shinobi at the chuunin exams. The same fear that had been directed at her by people in Konoha after she killed Kazuku. She didn’t want the village to fear her. She wanted to protect Konoha and all the people living there. By becoming ANBU, she was proving her loyalty to the village, showing them that she would always protect and defend them and that they didn’t need to be afraid of her.

So Sakura buckled down, insane as his methods were, Itachi was teaching her what she needed to know in order to join the ranks of the ninja elite, and she would be damned if she didn’t learn it. She pushed herself past her limits every day, collapsing into bed at the end of each day exhausted. And she grew stronger.

At the end of the three months her reaction time was instantaneous, she was much better at predicting an enemy’s next move and planning how to counter them. She could sneak through the Uchiha compound without setting off the hundreds of traps that Itachi had set. She could design strategies when ordered and adjust them without blinking as the circumstances changed.

When her three months were up, Itachi declared her ready. Sakura had given him an impromptu hug, which he returned after a second of hesitation, and sprinted to the Hokage tower to tell her shishou that she was ready to take the most difficult exam of her life.

Tsunade had not been surprised to see her, and told her to return the next day for the first part of the exam. Sakura returned home to the Nara compound, telling her family that she would be taking the exams the next day. They had all been very supportive of her decision, and her father jokingly told Shikamaru that he needed to get a move on or his sister would really outrank him. Shikamaru had called them both troublesome and mumble something about maybe taking the jounin exams next year, but that Sakura could keep ANBU. He did not want that much work.

-Sakura went from asleep to alert at the sound of weight settling on her window sill. A kunai was thrown before she even knew who it was. The ANBU crouched in her window plucked it out of the air.

“Lady Hokage requires your presence immediately.”

Message delivered, the ANBU vanished. Sakura rushed to dress in black pants and shirt and her jounin flak vest, grabbed her already waiting packs, and appeared in the Hokage’s office in a whirl of leaves.
Normally that irritated Tsunade, but now she did not even notice the leaves the littered her floor.

“Itachi’s team ran into trouble on a mission. I need you to join up with them and finish the mission. I normally wouldn’t do this, but there is a high chance that they are heavily injured, and you are already training for ANBU. I’m sure you would have passed the test tomorrow, so I’ll let this slide and you can take the test when you return.”

“Hai, Tsunade-sama.”

“Your priority is the mission. Save them if you can, but make sure that the mission gets done.”

“Hai, Tsunade-sama.”

The Hokage handed over a scroll with the mission details of Itachi’s mission and told her to hurry.

Sakura practically flew through the trees. Itachi’s team had been sent on an assassination mission. Someone was giving the Akatsuki information on Konoha, and they needed to take him out as soon as possible, which in ANBU jargon translated to he needed to be dead last week.

The mission details said his name was Chokichi. His name seemed accurate. He had to have long lasting luck to not have been caught as a traitor before now, but that luck had clearly come to an end. Or maybe not considering she needed to save the team that had been sent to kill him. Maybe his luck was still holding true.

He was hiding out in Tanzaku Castle, a town a half a day’s journey from the Leaf Village.

Worst case scenarios played through Sakura’s head as she raced towards Tanzaku. Was it possible that Shisui, Itachi, or Genma was dead? Had all of them been killed and she was racing to her own death? Would she be unable to save them and complete the mission?

Each scenario was worse than the previous. Sakura’s adrenaline levels had become astronomical. With the aid of adrenaline and chakra, she cut down the journey by several hours, arriving in Tanzaku town an hour before the sun was due to rise.

She needed to find one of her targets quickly. Profusely thanking Itachi for teaching her to sense chakra, Sakura let her chakra cover the landscape, searching for the signatures she knew so well.

She found Genma first, to the north, and raced through forest in search of him.

She detected his genjutsu as soon as she stumbled across it. She pulsed her chakra so that Genma would know that it was her that had found him, and not an enemy ninja, and quickly dismantled the genjutsu.

Right away she could see the two large gashes that ran diagonally across his back, from the right shoulder to left hip. She reasoned that he must have been caught off guard by either someone who was left handed or capable of wielding a sword with equal skill in both hands.

It was a simple injury to heal. Her main concern was how much blood he had lost. It looked like the earth beneath him was bleeding; it was saturated with his blood. Genma was unconscious, and he did not stir once while she was healing him nor once she was done. Sakura moved him to a small cave she had passed on her way to Tanzaku. Leaving him alone, unconscious and defenseless was not the best solution, as she had no idea what had happened to those he was fighting, but she could not linger. She still had to find Itachi and Shisui.

Outside the cave she set up a few simple but devastating traps that would provide some defense for her unconscious teammate, and an elaborate genjutsu designed to make it seem like there was no cave and to subtly subvert the attention of anyone who might be looking in another direction.
As it was a rather low key genjutsu, Sakura hoped it would go unnoticed.

She returned to the clearing where she had found Genma, and spread out her chakra again. Shisui’s signature was so faint she nearly missed it. Fear gripped her heart. The weaker the signature the closer he was to death and his was currently flickering.

Shisui was breathing shallowly. That, plus no visible wounds that she could detect, told Sakura that he had breathed in poison. Airborne poisons were more difficult to remove than their liquid counterparts. With airborne poisons, the poison entered the lungs as well as the bloodstream, and removing poison from the lungs was a delicate procedure.

Sakura carefully and painstakingly set about removing the poison from Shisui’s lungs first. The water combined with the air in his lungs, turning the poison into liquid form, which she quickly extracted before it could soak into the tissue of his lungs. During the entire procedure, she had to carefully monitor the level of water in his lungs. Once it was out of the lungs, the poison in the bloodstream was simple to deal with. Shisui had been poisoned by a well-known Konoha poison, and she carried the antidote with her.

“Captain.”

She hushed him. He could talk when she was done healing him.

“They took the captain.”

Sakura nearly dropped the antidote. Itachi had been taken captive. How? Itachi was an incredibly strong ninja, one of the Uchihas. How had they managed to take him captive? It seemed impossible to Sakura.

“They’ve taken him to the castle.”

Sakura nodded, promising Shisui that she would get him out. “How did this happen, Shisui? How did you guys come to be so injured? How did they get Itachi?”

Shisui closed his eyes and grimaced. “They were more than we were expecting. We had been informed he only had fifteen guards. But there were fifty.”

Sakura sucked in a breath. Fifty bodyguards?

But Shisui wasn’t done. “They were stronger, too. Every one of them at least ANBU. We thought we would be face highly skilled jounin.”

How on earth had this Chokichi managed to get so much protection? ANBU did not come cheap. It would cost a fortune to pay for fifty ANBU bodyguards.

“We had split up. I went ahead and Genma made sure we weren’t being tailed. They ambushed us. I saw them carry the captain away, towards the castle.”

Sakura pressed him for more details. She needed to know how many they had killed and how many she would be facing when she tried to rescue Itachi. She memorized the description of the floor plan that he gave her. It wasn’t complete, seeing as their team had only expected to need to find Chokichi from their point of entry and get out once they were done. Once inside she would need to find Itachi on her own.

She moved Shisui to join Genma in the safe house she had made. She felt much easier now that Genma wasn’t defenseless. Shisui might have been sleeping, but it was better than unconscious, and he would be able to react if needed.
Sakura crouched in a tall tree, observing the castle. It was in ruins. Walls were falling apart; there were some places where she could see obvious holes in the walls. There was at least one ANBU stationed at each of these holes and some were also guarded with jounin.

She would have to be very careful infiltrating. ANBU were trained to stand for hours on end, remaining motionless. The only thing that moved was their eyes as they swept from side to side, searching for even the slightest movement. The ANBU were positioned so that every inch of the grounds, both inside and out, had eyes watching.

It wasn’t only the enhanced security that had Sakura hesitating. Her heart and mind were at war. As a shinobi of Konoha, she had to fulfill her mission, which was to save the Konoha ANBU if possible and take out their target. Itachi had been captured, and that normally meant instant death for an ANBU. Theoretically, Itachi should have already killed himself to prevent the enemy from getting any information from him.

However, from the report Shisui had given her, Itachi was in no condition to do so. He had been rendered unconscious and restrained. That meant there was a possibility that he was alive and needed rescuing.

So, should she do as her mind commanded, and do her duty as a ninja by assassinating Chokichi, completing the mission but leaving behind Itachi, or should she listen to her heart, which was screaming that those who break the rules are scum, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum. From day one, she had been taught that her teammates were more important than the mission, but she had orders from her Hokage, given to her as if she was an ANBU operative, telling her to finish the mission first.

Was there anyway she could do both? Could she assassinate Chokichi and save Itachi? If she rescue Itachi first, it was possible that he could help her finish the mission, but it was also possible that he would be in no position to continue or that they would be anticipating a rescue attempt and that she could be caught too. If she tried to take out the traitor first, she might alert the castle to her presence, in which case they might decide having a prisoner is too much of a risk and they could kill him.

She could always call for more assistance, but it would take too long to arrive. By that point Itachi would be dead and the information handed off to the Akatsuki.

Sakura could try to rescue Itachi, remove him from the castle and secret him away to the cave with Shisui and Genma. If she took that option, it was possible that she could save the captain and still finish the mission assignment. Security would most likely increase when she had returned, and it would be harder to get close to Chokichi, but Sakura felt like it was the best option.

It was the only option really. She could not abandon a comrade.

Sakura circle the castle. She decided to enter through a servant’s entrance. It was a small door, tucked away into a corner of the castle where it was unseen. She would have to take a chance with it. She couldn’t see any shinobi outside of it, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t someone standing guard on the other side of the door. She couldn’t risk probing with her chakra. Every ninja in the vicinity would recognize a foreign chakra and would immediately be on the offensive.

She waited until the rotating guard had passed beyond the door. She had seen six different guards walk the perimeter. Sakura had three minutes before the next guard rounded the corner. She slipped under the wall through an opening at ground level that probably once served to release water. She moved in tandem with the shifting shadows of a large, bare tree, using it to cloak her
own movements.

The door opened easily, and thankfully, without creaking.

There was a man on the other side of the door. Apparently, he wasn’t expecting anyone to come through the servant’s entrance because he was dozing against the wall.

The silent door didn’t mean Sakura went unnoticed. He awoke with a snarl as she put one foot on the stone floor of the castle, leading her to believe he had been monitoring the floor with his chakra, and leapt at her, sword drawn high.

Sakura didn’t take out her own sword, or any other weapon. Metal hitting metal was a distinctive sound, and it was imperative that she did not get caught.

Her short stature let her duck well under his swing, and she continued forward, thrusting her palm into his chest. A minute burst of chakra stopped his heart.

He stopped moving abruptly, his grip on the sword going slack. She grabbed the sword from the air before it could clatter to the ground as the ninja fell lifelessly. Sakura sank weak kneed to the ground, unable to take her eyes off the man she had killed.

He wasn’t the first person she had killed, but he was the first that was not an Akatsuki. She understood as a ninja that she would be expected to kill, but knowing it and doing it were two different concepts. When she had killed the Akatsuki, she was fighting for her life, fighting to protect others, especially her students and Naruto. This guy was only doing his job, and she had killed him.

Sakura forced down the bile that was threatening to choke her, and with a simple fire jutsu, the only one she was capable of doing, burned the body.

She followed her gut instinct, sticking to servant passageways as she descended into the castle. She figured that Itachi would be held in the dungeon. It was typical for shinobi to keep prisoners underground for many reasons. One, it ensured that the prisoner could not determine where they were being held without any landmarks to be seen. Two, it deprived them of sunlight, which played a part in three, that dungeons made it easy for shinobi to lose track of time, and four, dungeons had a natural feeling of hopelessness associated with them.

The pinkette heard them before she saw them. She had smelt them even earlier than that. The guards that had been assigned to Itachi had been drinking. The scent of alcohol reeked. They were laughing drunkenly, taunting Itachi, and getting angry when he remained silent. There were only four of them.

Given their current state of inebriation, it was child’s play to get the drop on them. Itachi was the only one to see her, and she quickly signaled for him to hold his breath. Without checking to see if he had, she rolled a smoke bomb that she had modified into a poison bomb into the middle of the drunken guards.

They had all gotten to their feet when it had gone off, but none had been smart enough to remember to not breathe. Four thuds later Sakura wrenched apart the bars on Itachi’s cell and lead him out of the dungeon.

“What are you doing?” he whispered furiously as soon as they were out of range of the poison. “The mission. . .”

“I’m not abandoning the mission,” she said sharply without looking at him, too focused on navigating the maze of passageways back to the door she had entered from. “but I am not
abandoning my comrades either. Kakashi-sensei taught me that those who break the rules are scum, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum, and I follow that creed.”

Itachi fell silent.

“Are you injured?”

“Not physically.”

At that Sakura stopped to give him a pointed glare. “What does that mean?”

“They sealed my chakra.”

“I don’t know Fuuinjutsu. I can’t release that seal.”

Itachi nodded. “I know. What do you plan to do?”

“First I need to get you out of here. I found Genma and Shisui. They’re both fine,” she said quickly when she caught his worried look, “I’ve hidden them away in a cave. Genma’s currently unconscious, and Shisui was sleeping when I left.”

“You left them defenseless?”

“There not defenseless!” Sakura snapped at his assuming and astonished tone. She would never leave an injured comrade defenseless. “I set up some perimeter traps and the strongest genjutsu I could that won’t be spotted easily. I’m going to take you there. At least you’ll be able to fight if you are attacked.”

Itachi followed her silently to the cave. Once she had seen him inside and run a quick check on both Shisui and Genma, Sakura returned to the castle. She got inside quickly in the same manner, but this time she picked her way up through the castle in search of Chokichi.

The castle was unstable. It was dangerous to navigate because it was crumbling away. She made her way through the destroyed part. Chokichi would be in the safest part of the castle, and from what she had observed of the castle, that would be the north tower. The tower was the ideal location to take refuge. They were small spaces, which limited space. And while it limited how many guards he could have in the room with him, it was an effective strategy against anyone hoping to come up the stairs.

Sakura would literally have to fight ANBU in ones and twos in an enclosed space. Each opponent she faced would be fresh, with full chakra reserves, and she would tire with each consecutive battle and have less chakra available for the next fight.

There could only be ten ANBU in that tower, and maybe a handful of jounin, but that was certainly enough. She had gotten lucky so far. The ANBU she had encountered were unprepared. And while the ones in the tower didn’t have warning of her approach, they would be more vigilant.

She would have to deal with them quickly and efficiently. If she took too long they could relocate Chokichi or raise the alarm, and neither sounded pleasant. Either way, she would have to face impossible odds to get to Chokichi and assassinate him.

She paused at the base of the tower. There were two guards, jounin, posted outside the door that lead to the spiraling staircase up. Sakura was willing to bet, and she thought the even Tsunade would too, that there was at least one ANBU on the flip side of that door. If she wanted to go unnoticed as long as possible, she would have to deal with these two quietly. She had no way of
knowing how the guards were stationed inside the tower.

She cursed the fact that this was an assassination mission. It needed to be done quickly, cleanly, and silently, without leaving any incriminating evidence that would point back to Konoha. Even though it was a traitor to Konohagakure that was the target, it could not be known that Konoha had a hand in this. And that meant she couldn’t simply blow out the tower with a superhuman punch.

Besides the fact that destruction of the castle would not go unnoticed, even though it would kill every single person in that tower, it was also an obvious sign that she was there because she was the only shinobi aside from her shishou capable of such destruction with bare fists.

Sakura decided that poison was her most efficient method since she could not take the risk of using her chakra. Naruto had told her that Tsunade had poisoned Jiraiya’s drink when they caught up with her, ironically in Tanzaku town, with a colorless, odorless poison that left him unable to control his chakra.

Of course she carried it on her, and it wasn’t a poison which could be traced back to Konoha. Nobody knew that Tsunade was capable of making it. She backed up a distance so she could unseal the poison and a gas mask for herself. She had five doses of the airborne version of the poison. She would release the first one now, letting it slowly accumulate in the air. It would take care of the jounin and whoever was directly on the other side of the door.

She unstopped the vial containing the poison, releasing it in the direction of the tower. She knew it would only take a few minutes to affect the chakra system, so she slowly counted five minutes, and then threw two kunai. They caught the jounins in the throat, and Sakura leapt forward to prevent them from hitting the floor. She tossed open the door, startling two ANBU on the other side. She nailed one in the gut with her fist, causing him to double over retching and struggling for a breath, and scuffled with the other, covering his mouth and nose with her hand. He struggled and thrashed and bucked, but Sakura clung tight. Eventually his movement ceased. She turned to deal with the first one, but he was already dead. It wasn’t common, but her punch had enough force behind to break his xiphoid process and puncture his heart.

She repeated the process. The poison left them incapacitated, for they made to perform jutsus first only to discover that they could not. But by that time it was too late, and Sakura already had a kunai in their heart, had slashed their throat, and bashed in their skull. After each kill she dragged the bodies down the stairs so they would not get in her way.

Sakura found herself at the top of the stairs, staring at the door that was between her and her target. She had found it unbelievable that she had not been caught at this point. She was having a relatively easy time reaching Chokichi. So easy that she wondered if she was walking into a trap. She should not have been able to reach the tower unseen. She should not have been able to clear the stairway without the alarm being raised. Why hadn’t she been swarmed on the stairs by ANBU? Her fights weren’t completely noiseless. Someone should have been sent to investigate.

She cautiously opened the door with the toe of her foot, half expecting ANBU to fly through the door the second it was opened, but nothing happened. She peered around the doorway.

“Damn it!”

This tower had been a decoy. The room was empty.

She hurried down the stairs, pausing to burn the pile of bodies (how many had she’d killed? Sakura lost count.) The tower had been the obvious choice, and like a fool that was where Sakura assumed Chokichi would be. A systematic search of the castle was going to take time she didn’t
have. She needed to eliminate the traitor before he could sell any more information on Konoha.

But where the hell was he?

Sakura staggered. Someone was releasing an insane level of killing intent. It was crippling. She slumped to the floor, trying to steady her breathing. She was too late! The Akatsuki had come to get the information.

She pushed away those thoughts. If she thought like a defeatist she wouldn’t get anywhere. If she couldn’t stop the transaction she would just have to make sure that neither left alive.

Decision made, Sakura tracked the killing intent. It couldn’t have been any more obvious unless a sign was hung that said secret meeting occur here. Whoever it was that had come did not care that Chokichi knew he was come. In fact, Sakura was sure that the Akatsuki was intentionally broadcasting his presence to terrify Chokichi.

She shadowed the cloaked figure down three hallways and a set of stairs and then another hall. The cloaked man order the guards outside to give them privacy and the guards vanished. Sakura took a premade seal out of her pack. With just a touch of chakra she activated it. It cloaked her in shadows, and she slipped into the room behind the Akatsuki unseen and pressed herself into a corner.

The hood of the cloak dropped, and Sakura barely stifled a gasp.

It was Kabuto.

Sakura mentally ran down everything she knew about the Akatsuki, but there was no mention of him being a member or working for one. The only known association they had for him was with Sound and Orochimaru. What was he doing here?

Kabuto reached under his cloak and removed a sack of what Sakura assumed was money. Chokichi tightened his grip on the scroll he was holding. Both items were set down on the table between them. As soon as he had let go of the scroll, Chokichi snatched up the bag of money and backed away from the table. Kabuto pocketed the scroll.

“That concludes our business.” Chokichi said.

“Yes,” Kabuto hissed, “it does.” And in a blindingly fast movement, the silver haired bespectacled ninja struck out with a chakra scalpel and severed the trachea from the inside, leaving no outward marks.

“You have served your purpose.”

Sakura watched as Kabuto strode across the room. What could she do? She didn’t know what Kabuto was capable of, besides twisting medical ninjutsu and using what was meant to heal to kill. Should she confront him? Could she beat him and retrieve the information?

Kabuto thrust his arm out to the side, aimed at her, and four snakes shot out from beneath the sleeve of his cloak. She cried out when they bit into her. They didn’t poison her, but they had a strong bite.

“Well, what do we have here? A little pink haired spy?” Kabuto laughed lightly as he yanked her out of the shadows. “Did you really think you could hide from me little girl?”

-ANBU-
Kabuto watched with unveiled amusement as the pink haired girl struggled in his snakes’ grasp. She couldn’t be very experienced. He had seen her sneak into the room behind him.

He released the snakes, replacing them with his own hand around her throat. Her own hands automatically came up, trying to wrench his hand off her neck. He applied more pressure, watching as her struggles grew feebler and she started to turn blue; then he relaxed his grip so that he was still holding her suspended but not choking her.

“Perhaps you should have stayed in the academy a little longer, little girl.”

“Fuck. . . you.” She whispered harshly.

He smirked. “There will be plenty of time for that later, my dear.” It amused him to no end to see how large and white her eyes got, how the color drained from her face.

“Now, what are you doing here? Who sent you? Was it Danzou? Does he not trust Lord Orochimaru?”

Her eyes widened further, and he took that as confirmation. Why Danzou had sent this vapid chit, Kabuto didn’t care, but it meant that he didn’t think that Orochimaru would uphold his end of the bargain.

“Well, that changes things. What to do with you?”

Kabuto yelped when she slashed his bicep with a chakra scalpel, slicing through the muscle. He cursed himself for being fooled by her appearance. Pink hair or not, she was one of Danzou’s minions, and always more dangerous then she looked.

The girl tried to scuttle away. He sent a vicious kick to her rib cage, delighting in the sound of at least two breaking, and placed his foot on her lower leg.

He was interrupted by the ANBU that ran in armed for battle.

“Return to where you came from. I’ll deal with her.” Kabuto snapped.

The group of ANBU hesitated. He shot his snakes at one, this time letting them letting them inject their venom. The ANBU screamed, dropping to the ground foaming at the mouth. When Kabuto looked up from the disgrace the other ANBU were gone.

“Now, where was I? Ah, yes,” he stomped down on her leg.

The girl shrieked as her leg snapped.

Kabuto knelt down beside her, stroking her check with the back of his hand. “Maybe this will teach you to keep your nose out of places it doesn’t belong.” He twirled a kunai by the ring around his ringer, grasped the handle, and slammed it into the girl’s stomach.

She shrieked again, crying and begging for him to stop.

“I have to get going. Orochimaru does not forgive lateness. Unfortunately that means I can’t finish this, but you’ll die soon enough.”

-ANBU-

Sakura watched horrified as Kabuto tortured her.

Part of it was because she was absolutely terrified by him and what he was doing. The other part
was because she feared that he would see that it was a genjutsu, and do worse when he found her in payment for tricking him.

She had cast the genjutsu at the same time she cut him with the chakra scalpel. The unexpected pain, because he was not expecting her to fight back, distracted him long enough for her to put in place a simple illusion in which he she was still on the ground at his feet. In reality, she had crawled a short distance away.

When he crouched beside her to torment the illusion Sakura further, she had lifted the scroll from his pouch, which she could reach because cloak parted to allow him to kneel, and replaced it with an empty one intend for her mission report.

He strolled out of the chamber after he stabbed her none the wiser of her deception. She didn’t release it though. Sakura didn’t know if those ANBU were truly gone; and if they came back to find an empty room where there should have been a dying girl her ruse would be discovered.

She was amazed she had gotten out of the room relatively unscathed. Her only injury was the bruising on her throat and the bites left from the snakes. It was a miracle. Kabuto had been so cocky, so sure of himself and what he was seeing. He didn’t even double check the scroll. Actually, Sakura realized that he had never looked at it to begin with.

Sakura retraced her steps out of the room, down the hall, up the stairs and all the way back to the servants’ entrance she had first entered through. There wasn’t a soul in sight inside and Sakura prayed that her luck held. And it did. The grounds were empty.

She crawled under the wall and ran to the cave.

Genma, Shisui, and Itachi were fine. The ANBU did not find them.

Sakura tried to give the scroll she had stolen from Kabuto to Itachi, but he insisted that she hold onto it, calmly pointing out that in the event of an attack, she was the only one that would be able to protect. Grudgingly agreeing with that logic, she slipped it into her hip pouch.

Shisui and Genma were still out of it. Sakura shouldered Shisui, the taller and heavier of the two, and she and Itachi, who was forced to carry a drooling Genma, trekked the long journey back to Konoha. At a walking pace, it took them nearly seventeen hours to get home. Sakura detoured to the hospital first and ordered a pair of nurses to settle in her two teammates. She couldn’t express how happy she was that it wasn’t her that was in need a hospitalization this time.

Then she and Itachi went to the Hokage Tower.

Itachi gave his report first, describing in monotone how they were ambushed by a higher number than anticipated and his consequent capture, ending with Sakura’s rescue of him and removal to the cave where he guarded Shisui and Genma until her return.

Sakura’s report was much longer. Tsunade stopped her every other sentence to demand more details, question her decisions, asking that she explain her thought process. She wondered if Tsunade had been second guessing her choice to send her on this mission, if she was concerned that Sakura was not experienced enough and had made a monumental error.

But that was not the case.

When Sakura finally finished her report, her shishou sat back in her chair with a satisfied grin and she heard Itachi chuckle next to her. She twisted her head back and forth between them, thinking that they had both lost their minds, when the Fifth Hokage spoke.
“Congratulations, Sakura.”

Said girl blinked. So, she hadn’t screwed up?

“That was extremely well done, well executed. You pass.”

“I pass?” she repeated.

“The ANBU exam. It is tradition in Konoha to send aspiring ANBU on an ANBU mission and manipulate the circumstances so that their forced to take the position of leader, or finish the mission, and so on. Some villages, the Kage just hand picks those they wish to make ANBU. This way, I can have a team of ANBU evaluate your performance,” Tsunade explained.

“Given, these were unusual circumstances. That was not the mission I had intended to assign you, but you did a fantastic job. So, you are officially an ANBU.”

Sakura stepped forward when Tsunade beckoned her. Tsunade clapped her on the shoulder. There was a slight sting, and when she pulled her hand away, Sakura’s shoulder was adorned with the signature black spiral tattoo that marked all ANBU.

Sakura stared at it. She almost didn’t believe it was real. She had just made ANBU.

“Report to the ANBU Commander in the morning to pick up your uniform and receive your team assignment.”

“I want to be the ANBU Medic!” Sakura blurted.

Tsunade raised a single eyebrow at her. “Yes, that is what I had planned.”

The pinkette shuffled her feet. “Oh, I thought, when you said team assignment, that I would be placed on a team.”

“You will be. You may be the ANBU Medic, but you will still have a team and take part in missions. ANBU can’t be spared. You’re filling in two very important roles. Most of your missions will be with your assigned team, but you will be shuffled around as needed or sent out as reinforcements as you were this time.”

Sakura blushed and nodded her understanding.

“I’m very proud of you, Sakura. For such an unpredictable mission and one that we weren’t in control of, I think you did a fabulous job. I don’t think Itachi could have done as well.”

“What?”

“I could not have deceived Kabuto like you did.”

She jumped when Itachi smoothly inserted himself in the conversation. She had forgotten he was in the room. “But you could have used your Sharingan!” Sakura exclaimed.

“He would have been anticipating that move. I would have had to fight him to get the scroll back. Your method is more efficient. Until he opens the scroll, he will not realize that you fooled him.”

Tsunade’s gaze darkened. She leaned forward, setting her elbows on her desk and steepling her fingers in front of her face. “Kabuto’s presence is worrying. I was lead to believe that it was Akatsuki that was buying the information. If it’s Orochimaru that he’s really working for…” she trailed off.
“I hate double agents.”

“What about Danzou, Tsunade-sama? Both Sasori and Kabuto said that he was giving them information. When Sai tried to kill me”

“SAI TRIED TO WHAT!” Tsunade roared.

Sakura shrank back, forgetting that she had not said anything about Sai’s betrayal in her write up of the Kazekage rescue mission. She had felt that it was something between just her and Sai. He was only able to let her know that Danzou was after her in front of Sasori, who knew about Root. When she tried to bring it up later, he had stuck out his tongue, showing off the seal that Danzou had placed on it to prevent his secret organization from spreading secrets.

She wanted to find more conclusive proof that Danzou wanted her dead before she tried to accuse a Council member of committing treason on multiple levels.

“During my fight with Sasori. Chiyo-sama was rendered unconscious, and Sai turned on me.” Sakura winced as wood cracked under her shishou’s white knuckles and hurried her explanation. “He said that Danzou saw me as a threat to Root and that Danzou needed me out of the way, although he didn’t say why, and then Sasori said that Danzou was his spy.”

“Why was I not informed of this four months ago?” Tsunade growled.

“I didn’t have any proof. It was just my word. Who would believe that Danzou was a traitor? Without hard evidence?”

Tsunade’s nostrils flared as she looked at her second apprentice, who was doing her best to curl in on herself in shame while still standing. Her anger bled from her. She couldn’t blame Sakura. No one wanted traitors, and the Council would never have accepted a fifteen year old’s word, even if she was a jounin, as proof against a respected advisor.

“Continue, Sakura.”

“Well, Kabuto only mentioned Danzou. Asked me if he didn’t trust Orochimaru.”

The desk was reduced to splinters under the Sannin’s fist.

Danzou was working with Orochimaru. He had a secret group called Root that he commanded. A group she had no knowledge of until now. A group that was loyal to him, and not the Hokage of Konoha. What was the man’s game? Why had he created Root? What was their purpose? And how did he keep them hidden? How did she, or Sarutobi, have no knowledge of this force of ninja?

Tsunade turned to look out the window overlooking Konoha. Where was he hiding Root? And how many other secrets did he have?

She turned back to the two shinobi still standing in her office. “None of this leaves this room. You will not speak of anything we discussed here to anyone else. For now, we will be the only ones that know of Danzou’s treachery. When you leave, you must pretend that this discussion never happened. Do not let anyone suspect the truth about Danzou. He’ll wriggle out of our hands like a snake in the grass if he gets whispers of our suspicions. You go about life as normal.

“Sakura.” The rosette jumped at Tsunade’s sharp tone. “Do not go looking. If Danzou catches you digging up the skeletons in his closest. . .Promise me that you will leave this matter alone. Promise that you will let me handle this.
Obediently, Sakura vowed, “I promise.”

She had no intention of keeping that promise. Danzou was targeting her. She needed to know why. She was going to do some searching. Sakura was going to find whatever he was hiding and prove that Danzou was a traitor.

-ANBU-

Itachi fetched her to the ANBU Headquarters the next morning so she could meet with the Commander.

The ANBU Commander was about the same height as Shikaku. He wore a dog mask, with three thick purple stripes, one along the side of each cheek and one on his forehead. She could see brown eyes through the mask’s eye holes. He had a head of brown spiky hair.

He was the only one wearing a white coat.

Sakura was told that it depicted his status as ANBU Commander. While she didn’t say anything, she thought it was pretty dumb to cloak the head of ANBU in white while everyone else was wearing black.

Tsunade had informed her before she left last night that Sakura would be the only other person other than herself to see ANBU members without their masks. She had been stunned by that information. It actually scared her a little. ANBU identities were supposed to be known only to the Hokage. The idea that she would come to know them too was mindboggling. She hoped that it was okay that her family knew, because she had already told them of her intention to join, and it’s not like all ANBU were unknown. Everyone knew that Itachi, Shisui, and Genma were ANBU.

Sakura had been assigned to Itachi’s team, which didn’t surprise her in the least. She was handed three sets of the standard ANBU uniform and a porcelain mask. Her mask was a cat. It had three thin red stripes across both checks, slanted down slightly like cat whiskers, and three more on the forehead.

Locked in the safety of her room she replaced the standard green jounin flak jacket for the grey chest armor, metal arm guards, and ninja sandals with spikes for traversing mountainous regions. She kept her own gloves and decided to find boots with spikes to replace the sandals. She placed the mask over her face and stared at her reflection.

Even with her bright pink locks, Sakura looked fierce. She could imagine what it would look like with her giant axe strapped to her back.

She grabbed up the black cloak, which was a little large on her, and swung it around her shoulders pulling the hood over her distinctive hair. With the cloak covering her, she looked like a totally different person. It was almost like she wasn’t Sakura Haruno Nara any more. She was anybody or nobody. She was whoever she wanted to be.

-ANBU-

Sakura did not keep her promise to Tsunade.

She tried to talk to Sai again, but he insisted that he could tell her no more than he already had. Sakura didn’t push it. Danzou was a sleazy character, and she did not want to find out how that seal prevented Root from talking about him or the organization.

She did research in the library, but it was fruitless. There were no scrolls with a mentioning of Root.
So she took advantage of her position as the Hokage’s apprentice and assistant to search the Hokage records, but that yielded no results as well. Well, no positive results. All Sakura learned was that Root had been disbanded years ago.

But that couldn’t be true if Danzou was still using them.

However, she was seriously starting to believe that Root didn’t exist. There was no record of them anywhere to be found. Tsunade had not called her in to discuss it again. Sakura’s heart raced out of her chest with every summons from the Hokage, but it was always for a mission.

With nothing for it, Sakura tailed Danzou. If she watched him long enough, he would slip up and reveal something she could use. But the old war hawk was slippery. He was harder than Kakashi to keep tabs on, and that was saying something considering her sensei’s disappearing tendencies.

She thought about asking Sai if he could lead her to Root’s headquarters, seeing as that wouldn’t involve him talking, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. Sai must have risked a lot to let her know that Danzou wanted her dead. And from what she knew of the man, he did not take failure lightly, so Sai would have gotten in serious trouble for failing to kill her.

But that had got her thinking. She switched to trailing Sai, thinking he would be much easier to follow than Danzou. And he was.

Sakura followed her teammate out of the village’s gates and to an underground tunnel system. She waited a few hours for him to exit the tunnel and made sure he was long gone before she entered.

It was a maze. Root members had to know the way through, but Sakura was not part of Root. If she tried to navigate this and got lost, the consequences would be devastating. If she was caught in the Root Headquarters that was not supposed to exist it could be seen as insubordination or treason.

It would be worse if it was Danzou that caught her. That would ruin any plans the Hokage had to find him guilty.

She turned around, fully prepared to leave and not get involved in this situation any more than she already was, when she saw the note.

She recognized Sai’s writing immediately, so she hurriedly unfolded the paper.

It was a map of the tunnels marking the path she needed to take. It looked like it led to a vault room, which was the perfect place for Danzou to hide his evidence of Root. There was a tiny note written in the corner.

*Your training is lacking, Ugly. Root excels in stealth; you would never manage to track one down here. Your actions have alerted Danzou. Be careful and be quick. Destroy this. Thank you.*

Sakura memorized the outlined route and burned the map. She would think about Sai later. Right now she needed to focus on getting into that vault.

-ANBU-

Accessing the vault was easy. Danzou had no protections on the door. Sakura thought it was because he never thought anyone that wasn’t Root would find this place. He was certainly going to come to regret that decision when she used this information to oust him as a traitor.

She quickly scanned through the documents she found. She was looking for mission reports or
statements, profiles, anything that proved that Root was still active and that Danzou was in charge.

Her eyes lit up as she finally found what she was looking for.

“It is the unseen ones who support the great tree of Konoha from the depths of the earth.”

Sakura whirled, shoving back against a cabinet as a voice spoke from the shadows.

Danzou emerged into the flickering torch light.
“Wha... What are you talking about?” Sakura stammered. Her heart pounded behind her ribs. Adrenaline surged through her blood. She felt like she had challenged Gai-sensei to a race to Suna and back and won. How did she not notice him? She thought she had improved her chakra sensing abilities after the chuunin exams. She had learned from Itachi Uchiha for Kami’s sake! So how was it that she was still being caught unaware?

“Root.”

‘What is he talking about? What the hell is root supposed to be? It’s a part of a plant!’

“Root is the unseen ones who support the great tree of Konoha from the depths of the earth. They are a subgroup of ANBU chosen specifically by me. Here there are no emotions, only skill and talent.

“Many of the missions Root undergoes are less than respectable, carried out in the dark - autonomous of Konoha’s authority.”

‘Why the hell is he telling me this? I’ll just tell it all to the Hokage. Oh.’ That was when she realized that he wasn’t going to let her go. Danzou would most likely kill her to keep his secret organization underground.

But he couldn’t kill her. It would be entirely too suspicious if Sakura disappeared. She was a high ranking ninja. She practically ran the hospital. Her disappearance would be noticed immediately and it would send up red flags that led to Danzou eventually.

She supposed he would destroy the scrolls she was still clutching, that way she would have no proof when she accused him of allying with Orochimaru. And if it was her word against his, the Elders would be in his favor. Hokage’s apprentice didn’t trump Council Member.

“Sarutobi was always too soft. Konoha’s shinobi weren’t prepared to fight in the shadows. That was the birth of Root. Root did what needed to be done to ensure that Konoha prospered as the strongest of the Five Elemental Nations. I did what Sarutobi could not.”

Sakura thought he was delusional. The bandages must have been wrapped to tight around his head. There was no way that promising Orochimaru he could be Hokage was best for Konoha.

Her eyes flicked to the door behind him. It was the only exit. Unless she wanted to smash through walls and risk collapsing the underground tunnel system over her head. If she could get past him, she remembered the way out. Sakura would be able to move much faster than Danzou. She would be out of Root’s hidden Headquarters and safe within the village where he couldn’t touch her without revealing his hand in leading a secret organization under the Hokage’s nose.

“You’re a small flower, overshadowed by trees, choked by weeds.”

There was a swish of cloaks. Twelve ANBU stood in a circle around her and Danzou. ‘Well, there goes plan B.’ She thought wryly. ‘Although I could always try going through the floor.’

“In the dark, a flower will wither.”

Well that wasn’t true. Sakura could think of at least one flower that grew in the dark. Indian Pipe, also known as “Corpse Plant,” was a waxy, whitish color. It turned black when it got old. It had flowers that drooped and tiny, scale-like leaves. It looked like a fungus, but it was actually a
flower. There were other plants that could grow in the dark too. White asparagus got its color by preventing it from getting any sunlight. Chlamydomonas could grow in the dark if there was a carbon source present. Parasitic plants like broomrape or mistletoe lived off their host plant’s ability to photosynthesize. Living inside a plant, they technically grew in the dark.

“What do you want? Why are you doing this?”

“What I have always wanted,” he answered. “To protect Konoha. Sarutobi could not do what was necessary. Tsunade refuses to heed my advice. I will make the sacrifices needed to ensure that Konoha is not seen as WEAK!”

The old man tapped his cane on the floor. Two Root restrained her from behind. The scrolls clattered to the floor.

“You have been a thorn in my side for years. But like a rose, careful pruning will take care of you.”

Sakura stared at him in disbelief. “Me? A thorn in your side! What did I do? I’ve never even talked to you!”

“You are Tsunade’s apprentice,” was the calm reply. “As such, should the Hokage be incapacitated, the Elders are forced to allow an apprentice the first chance to be the next Hokage. Shizune is too weak willed to lead the village, and she could be easily dealt with.”

Horror filled her. Danzou wanted to be Hokage. And he was going to kill Tsunade-shishou to get it. It didn’t even register in her mind that she was in position to be the next Hokage.

“But you,” he continued, showing expression for the first time, frowning. “Despite your age, the Elders would approve of you. The girl who killed three Akatsuki. A medical ninja like Tsunade. You would not be fighting on the front lines if a war started. I knew I had to deal with you quickly, before disposing of Tsunade.”

She almost interrupted to say that he wouldn’t be able to tear her away from the battlefield, should such an event occur. Danzou stepped forward, placing his cane under her chin, forcing Sakura to look him in the eye. “Do you know the easiest way to make sure a shinobi dies?”

It was clearly a rhetorical question, but Sakura answered anyway. “Chakra scalpels? Poison? A pulse of chakra that stops the heart beating? They all work for me.” She snarled. Danzou slammed his cane into the side of her face with enough strength to crack her jaw. The blow forced her to her knees.

“Insolent girl. No, the best way is to put them in the Bingo Book. Then the greedy, the selfish, the bloodthirsty, the insane, all manners of shinobi hunt them down. By placing a bounty on your head after you killed Hidan, I guaranteed you would be killed. After that it would be simple. A foolhardy shinobi from another country would kill you and Tsunade and your precious team would demand retribution from the village he belonged to. Your death would have sparked a Fourth Great Shinobi War, and when that happened the Council would replace Tsunade and I would make Konoha stronger than ever.

“But you didn’t die. You killed a second member of the Akatsuki. And then Sasori when you rescued Suna’s Jinchuuriki. At that point I knew that I couldn’t rely on other countries to deal with you. I would have to soak my hands in blood. I added the ‘flee on sight order.’ Not that it would have mattered. After killing three of the Akatsuki, no shinobi would even try to collect your bounty.”
The first time is happenstance, the second time is coincidence, and the third is conspiracy.’ She should have known there was something wrong with her encountering three Akatsuki. Sakura glared up at him. Danzou put her in the Bingo Book. He was going to start another full scale war between Konoha and her allies and another village just so he could claim the title of Hokage? And he was going to use her death that he orchestrated and blame it on her shishou and her team? How could he? “You’re a monster.”

Danzou laughed. “Monster? I’m a hero. When I am Hokage I will restore this village. It will be the strongest of the Hidden Villages. Konoha will be respected above all others.”

“You mean feared.” She spat on the ground at his feet and was rewarded with a clout to the head from one of the Root members.

“The shinobi world is dangerous. Those that are feared are not crossed.”

Hadn’t Tsunade-shishou said something similar? That people with power are people to be feared.

The pinkette flinched, remembering the looks she had gotten from civilians in Konoha and Suna, how they would go out of their way to give her space if she walked down the street. Their whispers followed her. Fear shined in their eyes. Eyes that would never meet hers.

“Fear is not the same as respect.” Sakura insisted.

“But it is my dear,” he said calmly. “Now to deal with little girls that poke their noses where they’re not welcomed.” One of the Root fisted a hand in her hair and yanked hard.

Sakura yelped. Elite ANBU that pulled hair? That was Danzou’s special forces? She could see why he kept them hidden.

“Fuinjutsu!”

She screamed. Her tongue felt like it had been lit on fire. His chakra felt slimy, if it was possible for chakra to feel like that. His goons released her and Sakura crumpled to the ground.

“That is a cursed seal that I had designed specifically for use on my Root members to ensure no information about myself or the organization falls into the wrong hands. It will prevent you from speaking about anything incriminating related to myself or Root. Your entire body will be paralyzed should you try. You won’t be able to speak or move. Orochimaru may have taken his research too far, but his experimentation and creation of Cursed Seals is unparalleled. You cannot break it. Only I can remove it.”

-ANBU-

Sakura stood before her mirror, mouth opened wide and tongue stretched out as far as it was capable of stretching. The Cursed Seal took the shape of three solid lines and two broken lines from the back of the tongue to the tip.

She had already tried once to say that Danzou was in league with Orochimaru. Despite having nobody present for her to tell the secret to, the seal reacted, turning her own chakra on herself and locking all her muscles into place for a half hour.

Danzou had spilled the entirety of his treachery to her, but she could do nothing because of this damn seal. She couldn’t tell Tsunade-shishou about the seal because she would have to explain Danzou, his Root faction, and his illegal activities, none of which the seal would allow. Not to mention her disobeying direct orders not to snoop. Tsunade would not be pleased.
The rosette threw herself on her bed. All the answers she had been looking for were on the tip of her tongue, and she had been trapped like a rat. Danzou would continue his illicit alliance with one of the Legendary Sannin and Sakura couldn’t stop him because she had been stupid and got caught.

She covered her head with a pillow, determined to waste the rest of the day moping, moaning, and wallowing in her bed at her failure. How could it possibly get any worse?

-ANBU-

Sakura had spoken too soon.

She had assumed Danzou would let her be, confident that his seal would prevent her from speaking about Root, and continue enacting his nefarious plans because she had been dealt with.

Apparently, silence wasn’t dealt with enough for him.

He wanted her completely out of the way.


The Hokage leaned heavily on her desk, heaving a large sigh. Homura Mitokado and Koharu Utatane, the Elders, stood to her left and Danzou to her right. Tsunade was giving her a pitying look. It was contrasted sharply by the hatred visible on the two Council members’ faces. It was well known the pair loathed traitors, which was rather ironic and hypocritical because they ignorantly followed Danzou’s endeavors. But Sakura hated Danzou’s lack of reaction the most. He only gazed at her calmly; like he hadn’t just accused her of treason.

“We cannot place the blame on you. It is not your fault that you were tricked by Orochimaru.”

“They are sending me to Blood Prison!” Sakura interrupted.

“It is not a prison. It is a correctional facility. Technically.” Tsunade snapped. “The point is, for your own safety, you will be transferred to Hōzuki-jō. Orochimaru’s arms will not reach that far and you will be protected there once he learns that his contact was revealed. You will be safe.”

Sakura could do nothing as her chakra was bound and she was dragged out of the room by a squad of ANBU. The Elders had swallowed Danzou’s lies. She supposed she should be grateful that he only made her out to be an unwilling accomplice to Orochimaru’s plans and not a practitioner of forbidden jutsus.

Four faces followed her. Two glared. One full of hurt and regret. And the last one wore a small smirk.

Sakura couldn’t understand why her shishou was allowing this. Tsunade knew she wasn’t in league with Orochimaru, so why was she allowing these lies? Why wasn’t she defending her student to the council?

She bit her tongue to keep from cursing Danzou. Yelling at him would do her no good, even if it would make her feel a lot better.

-ANBU-

Tsunade did not turn from her window overlooking the village as Shizune announced the arrival of the last person she was waiting for.
Behind her Kakashi Hatake stood with his distinguished slouch, familiar orange novel obscuring his face. Sasuke Uchiha leaned against the wall by the door, looking surly and impatient. Naruto Uzumaki paced, temper fit to burst, and his worry for their missing Sakura-chan palpable.

“Now that you’re all here,” Tsunade was interrupted by a loud protest from Naruto.

“Sakura-chan’s not here, Baa-chan! You can’t start without her! And neither is Sai-teme!”

The Hokage sank into her chair. “This is about Sakura. Danzou accused her of working with Orochimaru during your first chūnin exams and convinced the Elders she needed to be sent to Hōzuki-jō for her own safety.”

Kakashi’s Icha Icha Paradise hit the floor with a thud. It was the only sound in the room. Sasuke stood from the wall, surprise etched on his face. Naruto looked like he had been sentenced to Hōzuki-jō himself.

“You let her be sent to Blood Prison?” the blonde croaked. “How could you? She’s your apprentice. She’s Sakura-chan! She would never work with Orochimaru!”

“I had no choice, Naruto!” Tsunade snapped. “My hands are tied. The Elders and Danzou voted to send her to Hōzuki-jō. Be grateful that she’s not dead.”

Naruto flinched as if she had struck him.

“In light of the recent events, and Sakura’s and Sai’s involvement in them,” the Fifth Hokage ignored Naruto’s cry at Sai’s implication, “and due to the fact that all members are ranked chūnin or higher and Yamato’s MIA status, Team 7 has been disbanded.”

Tsunade turned her attention to the paperwork cluttering her desk. She could not watch as two of the three men in front of her self-destructed from hearing her lies and half-truths.


It was a testament to how guilty Team 7’s sensei felt for not knowing, for not protecting Sakura, that he offered to pay. Naruto’s silent refusal said more.

-AHBU-

She was silent the five day trek to Land of Hot Water’s border.

Most shinobi were under the impression that Hōzuki-jō was located in Kusagakure. Only the Kages knew otherwise. Blood Prison’s real location was in the Land of Hot Water, right on the edge of a cliff. The prison was under the control of Yusagakure. The only way to get out of Hōzuki-jō was for the village to send an official request for release.

With Danzou controlling things from the shadows like a puppet master, she shivered at the reminder of Sasori. Sakura was pretty sure that message would be lost in transit.

Hōzuki-jō was technically supposed to be a criminal containment facility and a correctional facility rolled into one, if one ignored the fact that many went in but none came out. But everyone knew that it was truly a prison. You went to Hōzuki-jō for life.

It was supposed to be neutral grounds, so that all countries and villages were welcome to send their criminals to Hōzuki-jō, but the leader, Mui, was corrupt. He took money from Danzou to supply Orochimaru with test subjects for his twisted experiments. She found it laughable that
Tsunade thought she was sending Sakura there to protect her from Orochimaru when Danzou would ensure that she wouldn’t even spend a night within its walls. She would be transferred straight to Orochimaru. She didn’t even want to think about what life would be like as a prisoner of the snake sannin.

If that was even Danzou’s plan. The rosette could not fathom why Danzou felt the need to get her out of Konoha. He had her trapped like a wet behind the ear gennin but instead sent her out from under his eye. She mused that it was quite possible he was just a sadistic bastard and he wanted her to suffer. To him it didn’t matter if it would be in a prison cell or as one of Orochimaru’s experiments.

The three ANBU escorting her hadn’t said a word either. The silence unnerved her. Once the party of four had crossed the shared border between the Land of Fire and the Land of Hot Water, camp was assembled.

One ANBU threw down his cloak and removed his mask with an exaggerated sigh. “Geeze, I hate having to wear the cloak. Do you know this has been the longest I’ve ever gone without talking? I don’t understand how you can do it all the time, Itachi.”

“Shisui! Itachi! Genma!” Sakura cried as each man removed his mask. “What. . What are you doing?”

Shisui bounded over and ruffled her pink locks. “Just our jobs, Pinky. Now the question is what did you do to get yourself a one way ticket to Hōzuki-jō?”

“I didn’t do anything!” She protested, affronted that they thought her a traitor. It was better that she showed them her anger and not how hurt she felt.

“We know.”

“You know.” She repeated dumbly. “You believe me.”

“Of course we do, Sakura-chan.” said Genma. “It was all part of the plan. So, pull up some grass and give us all the juicy details.”

‘Part of the plan? There was a plan? Why didn’t they tell me?’ Sakura sat as far away from her almost teammates as she could. Well, they were her teammates technically, since she had the tattoo and was assigned to their team, but she hadn’t gone on any official missions with them as an ANBU yet. Too busy breaking into nonexistent compounds and being branded a traitor. She was pretty sure convict status removed her from the team. Why hadn’t she been informed? Hadn’t she proved during the whole Hand of God and Hidan fiasco that she could be trusted? For Kami’s sake, she had saved each of their lives more than once, but they still left her out of the loop.

“It was the Hokage’s plan,” Itachi started, “she felt it best not to inform you.”

“And why was that?” she asked through clenched teeth.

“She knew that you would disregard her orders and attempt to discover Danzou’s secrets on your own. And, of course, that he would catch you.”

Sakura couldn’t restrain a flinch. Was she really that predictable? ‘And why did they all assume I would be caught red handed?’ It annoyed her that they knew how she would react but did nothing to stop her.

“So,” Shisui continued, “she specifically ordered you to not dig knowing that that’s exactly what you would do. And when Danzou waltzed in accusing you of treason and associating with a
known fugitive of Konoha, she was prepared to fight his demands that you be executed on the spot and convince the Elders that Orochimaru must have gotten to you during the chuunin exams and was using you and that it was Konoha’s responsibility to protect you from the big bad snake man,” he finished jauntily.

‘Oh, it was shishou’s lie.’ Sakura giggled. Shisui had managed to sound so pleased with himself and made her near death sentence sound like a mere disagreement over what to eat for lunch. In that moment, Shisui had made himself her favorite Uchiha. She had spent the last five days full of regret and anger at herself and at Danzou, and Shisui had worded it so that all her troubles and pain sounded inconsequential.

Her laughter didn’t last long as his explanation fully sank in.

“You mean to tell me that Tsunade-sama purposefully manipulated me into a situation where I would be caught by Danzou, is letting me take the fall, and is locking me away in Blood Prison for crimes she knows I didn’t commit.”

Genma and Shisui flinched at her dangerous tone. To Itachi’s credit, he did not, and she would have lost all respect for her captain if he had.

“Yes. On the surface.” Itachi cut off Sakura’s attempt to outrage.

“You see, it works like this, Sleeping Beauty,” Genma said, causing Sakura to blush as she absentmindedly pulled the senbon that was ever present between his lips out of his mouth. She had warned him countless times that chewing on weapons was detrimental to his health, not to mention his teeth. “Now all of Konoha, and every village, town, and country associated with Konoha, knows that you’ve been sent to Hōzuki-jō for treason.”

“With you supposedly locked up Danzou will be overconfident. He will relax, slip up, make a mistake, and that will be enough for Tsunade-sama to convince the Council to act against him,” Shisui continued as he rolled his neck.

“Wait a minute.” Sakura held up her hands, begging Genma and Shisui to stop their back and forth explanation. “You keep say “supposedly” and “everybody thinks.” Does that mean you aren’t taking me to Hōzuki-jō?”

The two men laughed. “Of course not, Sakura-chan! Tsunade-sama would never send her precious apprentice to Blood Prison.”

Said female could feel a migraine building as the two more relaxed and carefree members of her short term ANBU team only smirked at her and refused to elaborate. “Then where are you taking me?”

It was Itachi who answered her. Something she was grateful for, otherwise Sakura was sure she was going to start cracking certain skulls.

“The Hokage has instructed us to escort you to a place known only to her and her summonings.”

Sakura took back her feelings of gratefulness. Her sometimes captain’s uninformative monotone was more annoying than Shisui. She turned pleading green eyes on Genma.

He rolled a second senbon from the left side of his mouth to the right, which was his way of shrugging, and said, “The exact location isn’t known to us. Technically, we’re meeting with some slug that will lead us all to wherever it is you’ll be hiding.”
“Us? You’ll be staying with me? Won’t Danzou find that suspicious?” Sakura questioned. “He must know I’ve gone on more missions with you than I should have. After my family and my own team, you’d be next on his list to investigate.”

Genma gave her a normal shrug. “We don’t know anything more than we’ve already told you, kid. I’m sure at least one of us will be staying while the other two return to remove suspicion.”

It didn’t make sense to her. How could one stay behind without making someone suspicious? She wanted to punch someone to relieve the stress that came with their lackadaisical attitudes and the lack of information.

Sakura sighed, disappointed. She had never liked not knowing. When she started at the academy she made sure to learn everything that she could. Many of Iruka-sensei’s history classes had focused on ninja that had failed due to lack of knowledge and she had vowed to never be caught in that situation.

It was rather ironic. After nearly a decade of learning and training to be a kunoichi she knew nothing. She had foolishly allowed her own curiosity to be used against her and trapped herself with her own actions. It seemed like she would never learn all the tricks to being a shinobi.

“The slugs are supposed to teach you senjutsu. And Tsunade-sama is trying to ferret out Danzou’s, that scumbag, secrets. With any luck you’ll be back in the village in a month or two.” Genma continued.

Sakura snorted. Her shishou didn’t have good luck. She didn’t really have bad luck either. Tsunade had absolutely no luck at all. The blonde always lost, and even when she won she lost. If she thought Sakura could be back in two months, the pinkette was betting on two years or more before she saw her home again.

“Wait a minute! Senjutsu?”

“You know, the art of using natural chakra and achieving sage mode. The Legendary Sannin are legendary because of it.” Shisui stated candidly.

“I know what it is!” she snapped at him. “But I can’t learn senjutsu!”

“You haven’t even tried! Do you always pass over new jutsus before attempting to learn them?” asked Genma.

“No, of course not. But I can’t learn senjutsu. It’s impossible for me.”

“Naruto managed.” Shisui pointed out.

Sakura hurried to defend her teammate. “Despite his apparent stupidity and fondness for leaping before thinking, Naruto is quite smart when he wants to be. But that’s beside the point. Senjutsu requires large chakra reserves from the caster in order to learn it. It’s what allows a ninja to manipulate natural chakra. Naruto has an insane amount of his own chakra, not to mention access to the Kyuubi’s. I don’t have enough chakra to use senjutsu.”

She ignored the frowns and furrowed brows she received. “Besides, in order to gather and use natural chakra, one has to stand still. What medical ninja has time to stand around on the battlefield?”

“Naruto didn’t stand still during the chuunin exams.”
Sakura huffed at the reminder. The idiot had turned a test of abilities into a stage for him to show off on. It had worked certainly. Naruto had more than proved to the other Kages with his use of senjutsu at his young age that Konoha was a village to be reckoned with.

She still beat him up for it later. She understood his pride in the village, but there was simply no need for him to go all out on the gennin. He had never stood a chance against the orange clad Jinchuuriki.

“Naruto has an unlimited number of shadow clones at his disposal that he can take advantage of. All he would need to do is dispel the clone and he would be able to use the natural chakra it had already gathered.”

“Can’t you do the same?”

“Shadow clones are not practical for me,” Sakura shook her head slightly. “Making a shadow clone puts me at a distinct disadvantage since chakra is distributed equally between creator and all copies.”

“An elemental clone might work,” Itachi suggested. “They are corporal and can manipulate chakra.”

“Yes,” she said, slowly, “an elemental clone can mold chakra,”

“Well there you go, problem solved. Whose turn is it to cook? I vote Genma.”

“But an elemental clone doesn’t return its memories or chakra back to the creator.” She continued, ignoring the two males bickering. “Once created it is a separate entity. I still control its actions but its experience and knowledge doesn’t return to me when it is dispersed.”

The group fell silent, pondering possible solutions to Sakura’s dilemma.

Sakura was mentally snorting at Shisui. He expected an awful lot of her for someone who didn’t even know how senjutsu works. She had considered learning the technique after she witnessed what Naruto could do with it at Suna’s chuunin exams, only to quickly come to the conclusion she would never be capable of learning it. She simply didn’t have the chakra capacity.

And there wasn’t any way to change that. Some shinobi are born with naturally large reserves of chakra, case in point almost every male she knew. Most start with an average amount and expand it through various exercises designed to enhance the chakra coils and increase the amount of chakra. But even then every shinobi has a limit. Chakra building worked exactly like muscle building. It would grow stronger with continuous practice, exercise, and training, but it could only grow so much. Not even Naruto’s chakra was limitless.

Sakura had pushed her chakra to grow. And while she still had a few years in which it could continue to grow, it would never be enough to allow her to manipulate natural chakra.

“There’s no reason shadow clones won’t work!” Shisui shouted.

The pinkette glared at him. “Shisui, I don’t have enough chakra normally to use natural chakra. There’s no way that a shadow clone with half my chakra could do it.”

“But why not?” he said, excitedly. “By halving your chakra, you create space for natural chakra to be absorbed. Instead of straight out manipulating it why don’t you gather it? Then, when the clone is dispelled it gives you back more chakra than you had.”

Sakura blinked. “That’s genius, Shisui. I can have clones absorb the natural chakra and give it
back to me!” She crushed him in a hug and sat back, grinning widely. “You’re a genius.”

Sakura happily volunteered to cook that night.

In doing so she completely missed the slightest narrowing of Itachi’s eyes as he glared at his older cousin.

-ANBU-

The trek to the ocean was louder; Shisui no longer restricted to not talking chattered on from everything from Danzou’s conspiracy and the Hokage’s plans, to expressing his jealousy that she was learning senjutsu to neither subtle nor sly questions about her previous relationships.

It was also much quicker with access to her chakra. Having chakra available also allowed her really hurt Shisui any time he tried to bring up the disastrous relationships she had had with Neji and Sai. It really was a great stress reliever. It also allowed her to draw water from the air to mask their trail. Four clones had been sent to Hōzuki-jō, Itachi’s preset with a genjutsu that would make Mui believe that she had made it there.

The company made quick work of the distance to the southern coast of the Land of Hot Water. Shisui and Genma would immediately return to Konoha and report to Tsunade that Sakura had been delivered into the capable hands of the warden of Hōzuki-jō. Itachi would accompany her to her final destination before continuing on with a solo S-rank mission he had been given.

The party of four said their goodbyes and she and Itachi boarded a small boat that would carry them to the former Land of Whirlpools. It was the shortest segment of their journey so far, and according to Itachi, their last, for the slug summoning cave they were looking for was hidden in the ruins of the once great land. Sakura stared at the ruined country, a feeling of rage building inside her.

Not much was known of Uzushiogakure. The Academy’s history class glossed over its destruction. Uzushiogakure was only mentioned because they were Konoha’s allies. The red spiral on Konoha’s green flak jackets was a symbol of the alliance between the two nations, honored still even though Uzushiogakure no longer existed. As the Hokage’s apprentice, Sakura had learned that Uzushiogakure ninja were renowned users of fuinjutsu. It was their unparalleled skill with seals that had led to their destruction, and any that had survived the fall of Uzushiogakure scattered across the other villages to seek refuge.

But most importantly, Sakura had learned, was that the name Uzumaki was a very common name in Uzushiogakure, but unheard of anywhere else. This ruined village was Naruto’s rightful home. Had the Land of Whirlpool not been destroyed he might have lived here happily. Growing up with a mother and a father, maybe even siblings, and become a great shinobi. He wouldn’t have had to bear the burden of caging the Kyuubi or dealt with the scorn of fearful civilians and bitter shinobi. Naruto would have been happy.

It was then, as she imagined the village of cylindrical towers bearing the Uzumaki swirl, the wide river running through the village that had wide bridges going over it, the snow topping the steep hills that surrounded the village, and the bright colors that the people of Uzushiogakure liked to dress in, for that must have been where Naruto inherited his love of bright orange, that she swore to herself that she would see the Land of Whirlpool rebuilt so that should that worst ever happen and Naruto needed to leave Konoha, he would still have a home.

The rosette was jolted out of her plans for the future as the boat grounded into shore. She gathered her pack and followed her captain up the beach. “You said something about meeting a slug?”
“Yes, Katsuchi?”

“Katsuchi! Really?”

“You know this slug?”

“Of course I do.” Sakura smiled widely. “Katsuchi is the first slug I summoned.”

“I’m pleased that you remember me, Sakura-chan.”

Sakura dropped to her knees next to the reddish-brown slug with a dark red four-pointed star pattern. The slug reached Sakura’s waist when the girl was standing and was almost ten feet long.

“Tsunade-sama sent me to guide you to our home and to put you through her footsteps.”

“Put you through her footsteps?” Itachi echoed.

“Katsuchi has an interesting way of getting her point across. It’s one that doesn’t normally involve speaking in plain terms.” Sakura explained to the Uchiha. “She’s going to be the one to train me to be a sage. She trained Tsunade-shishou.”

“Yes. That is my duty. It is best we start before the light is gone, Sakura-chan.” Katsuchi split herself into two slugs half her original size.

“Come with me, Sakura-chan, and we shall start your longest journey yet.” Came from the slug on the left.

“And I shall show Itachi-kun where the two of you will be staying.” said the right slug.

Green eyes flicked to the silent man. “You’re staying with me?”

“Not indefinitely. Tsunade-sama has assigned me a fake mission. I am expected to return two weeks after Shisui and Genma, but it is enough time for me to see you settled and learn what Danzou has told you before reporting back. Tsunade-sama said she would send one of us each month to inquire on your progress.”

Sakura felt her heart twinge. When Katsuchi had said that Itachi would be staying as well, she had been so happy to know that she would not be alone; that there would be someone else she could talk to who understood the situation she was in. But he wasn’t staying. He would get her information on Danzou and be on his way; back to Konoha.

She shook off the odd feeling. She had no right to feel that way. She was already luckier than she deserved to be. His team was risk- ing their careers to hide her beyond Danzou’s reach. And he had already mentioned that she would see them when they came to check in on her. She wouldn’t be entirely alone.

Feeling that there was nothing she could say, Sakura silently followed Katsuchi as the slug led her through the forest that was growing over and in between the ruins of Uzushiogakure, and continued to trek beside her as the followed the stream up river to a waterfall.

“Welcome, Sakura-chan, to Saisei no Haru, home of the slugs.”

‘Spring of Rebirth, eh. Fitting.’ She thought, admiring the crystal blue lake packed with slugs of every size and color. The slugs did help Tsunade-shishou in emergency medical situations.

“How is there a waterfall in the middle of the island? Is it even possible?”
“This is no genjutsu, Sakura-chan. This place is named Spring of Rebirth because of the underground hot spring beneath the cliff. The temperature and pressure leads it to erupt as a geyser and creates the waterfall.

“Now, let us begin, Sakura-chan.”

-ANBU-

The first thing Katsuichi did was correct her misinformation. Senjutsu was the art of using natural chakra, but natural chakra was a combination of spiritual, physical, and natural energy. She wasn’t drawing on ambient chakra from her surroundings, but energy instead.

Sakura quickly learned that simply being able to meditate would make the process of learning senjutsu any easier for her. She knew of the benefits learning senjutsu would give her; sage mode drastically increases the strength of all ninjutsu, genjutsu, and taijutsu; and an enhanced ability to sense chakra, including sense other practitioners of senjutsu. While in sage mode her speed, stamina, strength, durability and reflexes would increase.

Meditation allowed her to, in a sense, to become one with nature. First she had to take a swim spring which allowed for natural energy to enter her body easier, and she would continue to train with the water until she mastered pulling natural energy in.

Katsuichi monitored her training closely, not hesitating to smack the natural energy out of her when she drew too much. Even the sensation of partially turning into a slug cautioned Sakura to take her time to learn the basics before she started trying to use natural energy.

Sakura was thankful that she knew medical ninjutsu or else she’d be covered and black, blue, yellow and purple bruises.

She returned to her tent after another day of no success, wanting nothing more than to rest until Katsuichi woke her before dawn to repeat the cycle, to find Itachi sitting outside it. The rosette puzzled over his appearance for half a minute and then settled herself beside him. The quickest way to get rid of him would be to see what he wanted.

“Do you need something, Itachi?”

“I thought it best to let you adjust to life here before I approached you,” he explained.

“Well, now I know why he didn’t speak to me for a week.’ Sakura laughed. “Well, that’s good to know. I thought you were upset at me, because of me you have to stay here.”

“I will be leaving momentarily.” Sakura stopped laughing. Didn’t he say he was supposed to stay initially for two weeks? “Hokage-sama needs the information you learned in order to bring Danzou to justice.”

“She needs it now?” The pinkette hated how that made her sound like she couldn’t handle being left alone.

“It is the only evidence we have against him.”

“I know, but I can’t tell anyone.” She hurried to show him the seal on his tongue when he raised a slender eyebrow. “Danzou’s. If I try to say anything about that night it paralyzes me.”

“Perhaps you could try to send the message with Katsuichi?” He suggested.

Sakura’s eyes lit up and she immediately turned to the first slug she had summoned. “Would you
deliver a message to Tsunade-shishou?”

“At once, Sakura-chan.”

She opened her mouth to say that Danzou was working with Orochimaru only to scream. Itachi grasped her shoulders and tried to stop her thrashing.

“Are you alright?” he asked once she lay motionless in his arms.

Sakura panted. “I’m fine. That’s the first time that happened. It felt like Sasuke had hit me with an overpowered Chidori Nagashi. It only locked my muscles in place last time.”

The Uchiha’s eyes gave her a once over, checking that the effects of the seal were wearing off. “So it is impossible for you to tell anyone the details of that night?”

“Looks like it. So much for shishou’s plan.” She snorted.

“I shall inform Lady Tsunade and see what she suggests.” The Uchiha clan heir retreated to his own tent to draft a letter to the Hokage. Sakura flopped onto her back, curbing the urge to bite her tongue to see if it would remove the seal. She didn’t know if she could regrow her tongue, so even if it did rid her of the seal, she might not be able to rat out Danzou.

She crossed her arms behind her head, gazing at the twinkling expanse of sky above Uzushiogakure. What she hated most about this situation was that Danzou had practically turned her into one of his sycophant followers. Sakura had all the incriminating evidence needed to see Danzou tried and killed for treason and no means to tell anyone even the least damaging of it.

Currently, all her troubles were looking pointless. Maybe she should write Tsunade-shishou and tell her to leave her in Uzushiogakure. Sai sei no Haru was peaceful and welcoming. She could live out the rest of her life her with no worries of being hunted down, because Danzou would never think to look for her here when he learned that she wasn’t in Hōzuki-jō like he planned. Not to mention that she would live to be as old as the Third Hokage if she hid in Whirlpool.

Sakura shot into a sitting position. She could write it! The Cursed Seal prevented her from speaking, from telling others of Danzou’s crimes, but what was to stop her from writing it down?

She burst into Itachi’s tent, taking only a second to realize and disregard the fact that he was in the middle of changing and was currently shirtless. It didn’t stop her from mentally cataloging the tightest eight pack she had seen in her tenure as a medical ninja. “I can write it down!” she exclaimed.

“It does not prevent you?”

“Well, I haven’t tried yet, but I should be able to. It’s on my tongue, and Danzou said it was specifically designed to prevent his worshippers from speaking of anything relating to Root. They probably didn’t even think to keep someone from writing it down. And why would they? All of his followers take the seal willingly, and would rather die than give up his secrets. It’s a safeguard for them.

“But it was never intended to be used on someone that was against his beliefs. Not to mention he needs his own operatives to write reports too, so he can’t stop them from writing. This is perfect!” She pointed out logically.

Sakura appropriated a blank scroll Itachi and set straight to writing the fourth longest report of her career. She did not see the gleam of pride in Itachi’s eyes before his detached mask fell into place.
Dear Tsunade-shishou,

I hope this letter finds you well. If it doesn’t, what I have to tell you most certainly will. I don’t think even Shizune would blame you for having a celebratory drink.

I’ll start with how I’m doing; since I know that’s the first question you’ll ask.

The boys got me safely to Saisei no Haru. I can’t believe you let my stubbornness get out of hand. Or that you let me think I was really being sent to Blood Prison. Was three years as your daily punching bag not torture enough? Learning senjutsu is not as easy as I had thought. I thought it would be easier, given that Naruto managed in just weeks, but I’m at more of a disadvantage.

Meditating is simple, actually cathartic at this point. Even with the help of the special slug spring water, sensing and gathering natural energy remains a challenge for me. Hopefully I’ll see improvement soon; otherwise I might be forced to ask Naruto for help.

More importantly, however, Itachi and I found a way around the Cursed Seal Danzou gave me. He gives it to all members. It’s specially designed to prevent them from revealing his dirty secrets. Please rip him a new asshole for me. You could even assign him to ‘my cell’ in Hōzuki-jō.

Known Members

Dajimu- Active
Fū- Active
Hyō- Active
Kabuto Yakushi- Defected
Nonō Yakushi- Presumed Deceased
Orochimaru- Defected (I was surprised too.)
Sai- Active
Shin- Deceased
Tera- Active
Terai- Active
Torune- Active

Danzou has a nasty habit of plucking orphans off the street (or making them, he’s not fussy about where they come from or how he gets them,) and raising them as brothers (another thing I noticed, there are no females in Root,) and training them to lose their emotions by forcing them to kill the other. He also specializes in brainwashing. All members only take orders from him, and not you, the Hokage.

Known Missions

Infiltrate Iwagakure
Assigned to: Nonō Yakushi

Outcome: Success

Nonō Yakushi was an elite in the field of intelligence gathering. Infiltrated Iwagakure in order to confirm intelligence they received that Iwagakure was planning to attack Konoha. She successfully infiltrated the village and remained there for several years. She was critically wounded, however, after attacking Kabuto Yakushi whom had also infiltrated the village as a spy.

Infiltrate Great Hidden Villages

Assigned to: Kabuto Yakushi

Outcome: Successes

Danzou had Kabuto placed into all the other Great Hidden Villages (and possibly other villages) over the course of a few years to spy on them for Root. He’s ferreted his way into every village and brought about the destruction of a few.

Assassinate Kabuto/Nonō

Assigned to: Nonō Yakushi, Orochimaru

Outcome: Half Failure/Success

Viewing Kabuto and Nonō as a threat to Root, after they had become "too good" of spies, Danzou schemed to have both individuals kills each other. Slowly brainwashing Nonō, by showing her pictures of a young man who was not Kabuto and saying it was him, Danzou revealed that Kabuto had joined Root for the orphanage's sake and told her that they would release him once she assassinated a certain person. Unbeknownst to her when she was carrying out this mission, she was attacking the real Kabuto. Ultimately, Nonō was cut down by Kabuto who fled after she didn't remember him. This mission culminated in Nonō's death and Kabuto allying himself with the traitorous Orochimaru, who had decided to defect from Root, but had originally claimed that he was sent to kill either Kabuto or Nonō, depending who survived the ordeal.

Crushing the Ame Rebels

Assigned to: Unknown

Outcome: Failure

Danzou made an alliance with Amegakure's leader, Hanzō, to help him crush the rebel group led by Yahiko. In turn, Hanzō would help Danzou become Hokage. Although the joined forces did succeed in orchestrating the death of Yahiko, the mission ultimately failed when Nagato, enraged by Yahiko's death, killed practically all of Amegakure's and Root's shinobi present. Only Hanzō escaped.

According to Danzou’s records, this was the birth of the Akatsuki, leaded by Nagato who now calls himself Pein. Apparently the rebel group was led by Jiraiya-sama’s old students. You may have met them. Any chance we can have Jiraiya-sama explain that Konoha did not attack them and they’ll leave Naruto alone?

Killing the Prajñā Group

Assigned to: Unknown
Outcome: Success

Danzou once ordered for the assassination of the Prajñā Group, an ANBU regiment from the Land of Woods. The mission was apparently a success, but according to Fū and Torune, remnants still exist and target Root.

Infiltrate Team Kakashi

Assigned to: Sai

Outcome: Success

Sai was placed on our team to both to watch over Naruto and to kill me in a way that would be seen as an unfortunate accident. The Kyuubi Jinchūriki was a threat to his power base and needed to be monitored, and the Godaime’s apprentice stood in the line of succession. Personally, I consider this mission a failure. Sai has turned traitor for us and now supplies us with what information he can about Danzou’s plans and movements. Although it does make me doubt my taste in men. Did he even like me or was he attempting to seduce Konoha’s secrets from me? Maybe I should remain single my entire life like you.

Assuming Leadership of Konoha

Assigned to: Presumed all

Outcome: In Progress

This is his current objective. Root follows two creeds. “You are the leaves bathing in the sun. I am the roots that grow in the dark” and “In Root, you have no name. You have no feelings. You have no past. You have no future. There is only the mission.” Danzou is of the opinion that Konoha needs to be led in a more militant manner and that Root is the model for all shinobi behavior. He feels that Konoha has grown weak under the Third Hokage’s ideals and that he is the only one that can make the Leaf Village strong again.

There were vague references to a failed mission for retrieving the Byakugan that led me to believe that Danzou either staged Hinata’s near abduction or paid for Kumogakure to kidnap her. Either way you look at it, he tried to implicate Kumo and start a war to gain support for his more aggressive vision of Konoha.

Recent correspondence shows that Danzou has allied himself with Orochimaru. Danzou supplies Orochimaru with test subjects, either from his training program or by bribing the warden of Hōzuki-jō. Now do you understand why I could not believe you were sentencing me to prison? He would have sold me to Orochimaru immediately just to be rid of me. An old law says that a Hokage’s apprentice, if there is one, is first in line for the title of Hokage should the previous one not be capable of performing their duties and Danzou is doing everything he can to remove me. Although I think I’m much too young and inexperienced to even be considered for the position. Not that I want the job. Too much paperwork. And I could never take Naruto’s dream from him.

Brace yourself for this next bit. Along the lines of removing me, Danzou is behind my unwarranted addition to the Bingo Book. He hoped to paint a target on my back by making it known that I had killed Hidan so that Akatsuki would be gunning after me.

That’s all for now. I request that when you do send someone to check in on me next month, that it please be Genma. I don’t think I could deal with another Uchiha, even if they are nothing alike.

And if you could, please let my team and the Naras know that I am fine and that I did not commit
treason. And that includes Sai. Genma and Shisui said that Danzou dealt with him personally. All for the Elders’ sake since he dated me. They said Danzou would most likely send him underground for appearance’s sake. Whatever else he is, he is still my teammate, and no one on Team 7 leaves anyone behind. Given Danzou’s track record for tossing members aside... just make sure that he’s okay.

And don’t forget Moegi, Udon, Konohamaru, and Hanabi. I suppose they’re not my team anymore, but I’m not going to abandon them because they’re chuunins now. Keep them busy with missions and tell Hanabi that she better have learned the stone fist technique by the time I return.

Your (favorite) apprentice,

Sakura Haruno Nara.

P.S. I think this is more than enough to get rid of him quickly, don’t you?

-ANBU-

Sakura worried her bottom lip as three shadow clones gathered natural energy. She thought it was asking too much for this to work on her first attempt. She also worried about the lack of information she had received in the last three months.

Itachi had left, delivering her detailed report on Danzou’s numerous crimes, but no one had come since then. Sakura prayed that Itachi’s team was desperately needed for a long term mission and that nothing terrible had happened to Konoha.

“Now, Sakura-chan,” ordered Katsuchi.

The pink haired teen inhaled deeply and released the shadow clones. She expected either one of two things: to immediately feel an increase in her chakra from absorbing the natural chakra from her clones or to be smacked soundly because she had taken on too much and was showing characteristics of a slug.

But neither happened. Instead all she felt was the return of her chakra when the clones dispersed, minus that which had been used to power the jutsu.

“I don’t understand,” she told the slug. “I didn’t feel natural energy at all. My clones have the memory of gathering it. I got the memory but not the chakra.”

Katsuchi released a quiet sigh. “I was afraid of this Sakura-chan. As you know, extreme chakra levels are necessary to utilize natural energy. I had hoped that the shadow clones would be a sort of loophole, allowing you to hold more chakra than you could normally, if only temporarily. But it seems you must start out with more chakra than the average shinobi.

“By dividing your chakra amongst them, you’ve created plenty of space for the natural energy, but because the clones don’t have a large reservoir of your chakra, they cannot transfer the natural chakra they create back to your body when they are dispelled and it returns to nature.”

“I don’t have those types of reserves. Actually, I’m pretty average as far as how much chakra I have goes.” Sakura despaired. “It only seems like I have a lot because I control it better than anyone in the village.”

The red slug lowered her head mournfully. “I’m sorry, Sakura-chan, but I do not think that there is anything you can do to change this situation. We will still provide shelter and food for you until Tsunade-sama decides how to proceed.”
Sakura pulled her knees up to her chest and buried her head in them, wrapping her arms tightly around her legs to keep her from smashing them into the ground. Three months wasted. All because she had not been born with an insane level of chakra.

‘Well, I’ll have plenty of time to meditate and store chakra in my Yin Seal,’ she thought sarcastically. ‘I might even have as much as Tsunade-shishou by the time I’m allowed in Konoha again.’

With a heavy sigh, the rosette unfolded herself and positioned her body in a meditative pose, her mind already relaxing and turning inwards to direct her chakra from its coils to the sakura blossom around her navel.

The sun had disappeared behind the horizon before Sakura realized she already had a solution to her problem. Wearing a grin that could rival Naruto’s, she scrambled onto unused and unsteady legs and shunshined to Katshuchi’s side. The slug’s antennas perked up as the pink haired girl excitedly explained her newest idea.

-ANBU-

Danzou gazed impassively over the crater that was the flattened village of Konoha. He was not surprised by Akatsuki’s attack on the village. Despite the Third Hokage’s law, it was well known both inside and outside of Konoha that the Uzumaki boy was the Kyuubi’s Jinchuuriki. The Jinchuuriki may not have been allowed to know that he was the village’s weapon, but nothing prevented word of his existence from reaching the ears of others. He had spent years preparing for this inevitability.

And it had served him well. He ordered his Root not to fight when the Six Paths of Pein wreaked havoc on the Hidden Leaf Village. The Kyuubi brat had stepped up to save the day, nearly releasing the Kyuubi, killing the six Peins and left the village in search of the person controlling the animated corpses.

He had returned a hero. Whatever he had done had brought about the revival of every ninja, civilian, and child that had perished in the wide scale attack. The village sang his praises. For now, the boy was untouchable.

Princess Tsunade had been one of many to fall. She currently resided in a coma and none could say when she would awake. Danzou had been named the temporary Sixth Hokage in an emergency meeting of the Elders, Clan Heads, and the Daimyo. His position would be official after the Five Kage Summit.

Danzou stood with the aid of his cane, donning the white cloak and red hat symbolizing the Hokage, and summoned his personal guards Fū and Torune. He would show the other Hidden Villages that Konoha was a village to contend with.

He sent Dajimu with a message for Sai. The boy would prove his loyalty by taking care of Tsunade.

-ANBU-

Katsuchi was not as overjoyed as Sakura.

“So you are going to store the natural energy in your Yin Seal, Sakura-chan?”

“Yes! It’s perfect. The Yin Seal augments my natural chakra so that, in case of emergency, I have more available. If I store enough natural energy I’d be able to release it to enter sage mode.”
“Are you going to store it in the seal you have now? Wouldn’t that interfere with your chakra that’s already in there?”

Sakura frowned. “I hadn’t thought about that.” But Katsuchi was right. Although the natural energy would eventually be used in conjunction with her chakra, to use it correctly would require that it be balanced with her spiritual energy and her physical energy. If she stored it in her Yin Seal, when released it would pump both the natural energy and her chakra back into her body.

She didn’t want to risk the three energy types mixing prematurely. Kami, how stupid would it be to release the seal only to turn into a slug statue. Not that she would be alive anymore to care about it, but it would be pretty damn embarrassing.

“What if you made a new one?”

“A new one?” she echoed.

“Another Yin Seal,” Katsuchi suggested with a bob of her head.

“Two Yin Seals. Can I have two?” Sakura muttered to herself. “Tsunade-shishou said I only needed to meditate and focus the chakra into creating a seal on the body. If it was natural energy, it should result in a different Yin Seal. Katsuchi, you’re brilliant!

“IT’s probably best that I have two separate seals anyway. My problem has been not having enough of my chakra to manipulate the natural energy, but if I release both seals at the same time, the increased level of my chakra will allow me to use the natural energy stored in the second seal and I can combine them to use natural chakra. Katsuchi, you are the smartest slug ever!”

Slug and summoner returned to the underground spring so the girl could bathe in the water. Hopefully by sunrise Sakura would have a second functioning Yin Seal.

-ANBU-

The first thing Sakura did was lift her shirt and check on the Yin Seal on her navel. Despite having felt her chakra flow to her upper left arm, she wanted to make sure that the creation of a second Yin Seal didn’t affect the first.

She uttered a tentative “Yin Seal: Release,” and was surprised when only the seal on her navel reacted and released chakra back into her body. She hurriedly reformed the seal, restoring all of the released chakra back into it. Then she slumped to the ground.

“It didn’t work, Katsuchi.”

“Is there not enough chakra in the seal, Sakura-chan?”

“The amount of chakra stored in the seal doesn’t matter.” She answered wearily. “It should have released.”

“Did you only will your first Yin Seal to open? Maybe you need to focus on them separately.”

“I don’t think so. When you make a seal to set off an explosive tag, any tag armed with your chakra detonates. Chakra can’t pick out a single tag and choose just to explode that one. The release jutsu should have opened both seals because it releases Yin seals.”

“But the Yin Seal on your arm?”
Sakura tore off her shirt, twisting her head and rotating her arm inwards to get a good look at it. There was nothing there but her ANBU tattoo.

Did she imagine chakra flowing into her left arm? Maybe she had failed to create the second seal and didn’t actually store the natural energy. Or maybe she had not noticed the seal had been released because it only had a miniscule amount of chakra.

Reason after reason for why the experiment failed flew through her head. Her sense of logic argued that she was making excuses. Sakura had definitely felt the natural energy in her arm. There was no way she could mistake it for her chakra. The two simply felt too different. It was like comparing Naruto to Sasuke. There was no way to mistake one for the other. Sakura was left with only one conclusion.

“Katsuchi, can you make a tattoo into a seal?”

“I do not know, Sakura-chan. Most seals in the shinobi world are hand seals. There are not many that try to master fuinjutsu because fuinjutsu is so complex. Does not Tsunade-sama summon her ANBU through that tattoo?”

Sakura chuckled. “ANBU are not summoned like contract animals are.”

“No.” the slug agreed. “But Tsunade-sama’s chakra does flare in the tattoo when she needs an ANBU. Perhaps it is already a seal of some sort and when you focused on storing the natural chakra it went into an existing seal.”

“But then how do I release it? It won’t do me any good if Tsunade-shishou is the only one that can release the chakra. I won’t exactly have the time to stop in the middle of the battle and ask if they mind my sending a message to my Hokage so she can release my extra chakra.” The pinkette almost laughed at the mental image that created.

“Send a letter to Tsunade-sama now. She might be able to make a solution if there is not one to be found.”

-AnBU-

Dear Tsunade-shishou,

I have not heard from you since Itachi left. Is Danzou causing trouble? Are Naruto, Kakashi-sensei, and Sai alright? And Shikamaru, Yoshino, and Shikaku?

I am still well. Katsuchi takes great care of me and takes her role as my mentor seriously. I think she works me harder than you ever did. I do not think I have ever been this frustrated.

The clones failed miserably. They could not return more chakra than my coils could handle. I don’t suggest trying it. Chakra overload is an uncomfortable feeling.

Katsuchi had the marvelous idea to create a second Yin Seal solely for storing natural energy. The thing is I’m not too sure it worked. I thought I felt natural chakra in my upper left arm, but when I attempted a Yin Seal: Release only the chakra in the seal around my navel was released. I tried to find a trace of my second seal, but I only bore the ANBU tattoo on my shoulder. Although both Katsuchi and I could sense chakra in it.

To be honest, I am baffled and don’t know where to go from here. I cannot think of any reason why the second seal would fail. Can a tattoo even be made into a seal? Will your chakra interfere with mine?
What do I do now shishou? I feel useless hiding here attempting to learn jutsus that are beyond my capabilities.

I hope the situation with Danzou is resolved soon. I wish to come home.

Your frustrated apprentice,

Sakura Haruno Nara.

-ANBU-

She waited patiently for two weeks. She mediated nonstop, pouring natural energy into her ANBU seal. Even if she could not access it yet, it was best to be prepared. She had tried once to multitask. Directing two vastly different types of chakra to two different places was a disaster waiting to happen. That experiment had nearly turned her into a slug garden gnome.

After two weeks had passed she began to worry. She should have heard back from Tsunade-shishou by now. Itachi, Genma, or Shisui should have bent sent with a reply. Something terrible must have happened. There was no other reason for her shishou to be ignoring her.

“I cannot stay here any longer.”

Katsuchi nodded. “I understand, Sakura-chan. I wish you would not leave. It is not safe, but I will not stop you.”

“Thank you.” She quickly packed what little belongings she had been given by her ANBU team and said her goodbyes, running for the beach. There was no boat. It was most likely hidden once more along the shores of the Land of Hot Water.

The lack of boat was not an inconvenience for Sakura. It had been years since she first surprised Kakashi-sensei by skating on water on their mission to the Land of Waves, but she could still walk on water. Determination filled every line of her face. With a brief moment to focus chakra to the bottom of her ninja sandals, Sakura was flying across the turbulent water.

‘I’m coming, Tsunade-shishou.’

-ANBU-

Danzou stared appreciatively at the likeness of his face that was being carved into the Hokage Mountain. His appointment was official. Danzou Shimura was Konohagakure’s Sixth Hokage. He could finally turn the village around; forge it into the greatest of the Five Hidden Villages. There were no weaklings like Sarutobi and Tsunade to get in his way.

The summit had been long. It did not end as favorably as he wanted. The Five Great Nations had declared war on the Akatsuki after their leader, the man with a swirled orange full face mask with only one eyehole, who managed to break into the heavily guarded meeting and escape effortlessly, said that he was starting a war to capture the Bijuu. And the Raikage had been named leader of the Alliance instead of him.

The only good thing about his trip to the Land of Iron was it gave him an excuse to lockdown the Uzumaki boy, restrict his movements, and secretly monitor him. Complete control over the Kyuubi’s Jinchuuriki in the name of protecting him.

Danzou reclined in his chair, reading through the many requests for funds to rebuild various parts of Konoha. With war on the horizon, he approved the armory, the weapons store, the hospital, the torture and interrogation tower, the jounin station, and the academy, although the academy was
allotted a smaller amount. He had no intentions of waiting until the children were twelve. The academy would teach them to fight and they would be sent to the battlefield. He could not waste his resources.

He denied funds to rebuild homes, the playground, and the shopping district. Such frivolities would not be needed. The shelter that had been raised would suffice for housing. What food supplies they had would be rationed to those that fought and their families. The civilians would have to make do until Konoha could grow its crops again.

The only other good news he had since he returned was that of Tsunade’s death. He had confirmed it with no less than a dozen of the hospital staff. Her black haired assistant’s grief assured him the most. Tsunade was well and truly dead. Sai had done his job well, for everyone believed that her body gave out.

Konoha was his now. Danzou would see it returned to its glory from his years as a shinobi. Nothing would stand in his way. When the other Kages fell in battle because they were unprepared, five nations would look to Danzou to save them. The other Kages needn’t know that he knew the man behind the mask.

-ANBU-

Sakura studied the wall guard rotation from her crouched position in the dense tree cover. There were more shinobi on the wall than usual. Jounins instead of chuunins judging by their ages. It looked to her like Konoha was gearing itself for an imminent attack.

The slightest rustle behind her was the only warning she received. Sakura didn’t have the chance to scream as a large hand wrapped itself over her mouth and she was dragged out of the tree.

She was surprised when she was released abruptly and engulfed in a hug.

“Sakura-chan, you are a sight for sore eyes.”

“Shisui! What the hell? What was that for?” She punched him in the shoulder, hard. Then she noticed Itachi and Genma behind him. “And where the hell have you guys been? Just what is going on?”

“You missed quite a lot while you were on vacation.”

“Vacation?” Sakura spluttered. “I was working my ass off! I’d like to see you learn senjutsu in four months.”

“You did it?” Genma asked eagerly.

“Not quite,” she admitted. “The clones were a bust.” Shisui mimed getting stabbed in the heart. “So I made a second Yin Seal for natural chakra. Only problem is I can’t get the seal to release.”

“If you’ve not mastered it, why did you come back?”

“Because I’m worried sick about you!” Shisui was taken aback by her anger. “I haven’t from anyone for months. I don’t have a clue what’s going on? I half thought you had all died and Tsunade-shishou was going to leave me on that island forever.”

“Did you really?”

“No, but that’s not the point. The point is, what the hell have you three been doing the last four months and why hasn’t Tsunade-shishou answered my letters.”
“We’ve got quite the tale to tell you, Pinky.” Genma began.

“To start,” said Shisui, “Konoha was attacked by the Akatsuki looking for Naruto.” The Uchiha ignored her horrified gasp. “Pein completely obliterated the village and killed just about everyone.”

Genma continued. “Long story short, Naruto opened a can of whoop ass, defeated Pein, and somehow revived everyone who died, and is now the Hero of Konoha.”

“The village is being rebuilt. It’s why we were too busy to sneak away and visit you.” Shisui gave Sakura a pointed look.

“Naruto’s finally getting the recognition that he deserves. That’s great!”

“That’s not all.”

Sakura’s jovial attitude deflated at her teammate’s words.

“Tsunade-sama is dead. Danzou replaced her as Hokage.”

Itachi had to catch her to keep her from hitting the ground. Grief tore at her heart. Tsunade couldn’t be dead. Her shishou was the Hokage, the strongest ninja in the village. She couldn’t be gone. How could Danzou have won?

“How’s Naruto taking it?” Sakura had to focus on anything else or she would fall apart. She could mourn her shishou after Danzou had been dealt with.

“Not well at all.” Itachi finally spoke. “Danzou has him under constant supervision. Naruto refuses to take orders from Danzou. He’s locked himself in his apartment. Danzou has let his behavior slide for now, but he won’t much longer. Akatsuki has declared war on the Five Elemental Nations.”

Sakura gaped at him. The part of her that wasn’t terrified at the prospect of fighting a war was laughing hysterically. All of his efforts to use her as a linchpin to spark a war, and all Danzou had to do was wait for Akatsuki to attack.

“The Shinobi Alliance has been created to protect the remaining two Jinchuuriki. All the Hidden Villages are preparing for war.”

“What have you guys been doing? About Danzou?”

“Thwarting what plans we can without risking Konoha’s safety.” Shisui answered.

“And making his life a living hell.” Genma added.

“He doesn’t know it yet, but his claim to the title is only temporary.”

“How so?”

“Tsunade-sama will take it back with her fists if she has to.”

“You told me she was dead.” Sakura said flatly.

“You’re right. We lied.” Shisui said cheerfully. Green eyes glared daggers at him. “Kind of. Thanks to your little artist boy and yours truly, Danzou and everyone else in Konoha is under the impression that the Fifth Hokage is dead. Only the four of us, and Fugaku-oji-sama and Mikoto-
oba-sama know the truth.”

“Which is?”

“That she’s not dead, of course.”

Sakura held up her thumb and pointer finger a hair’s width apart. “I am this close to strangling you, Shisui Uchiha. Do not test my patience. I don’t think I have any left. Either tell me everything now or take me to Tsunade-shishou.”

Said male raised his hands to placate her. “She’s currently in a coma, hidden away in the Naka shrine. It’s a secret meeting place for Uchihas, underneath the main hall. We don’t know what’s wrong with her, or why she won’t awaken, or how long until she does. But for now she is safe. And Danzou doesn’t have the remotest chance of even learning that she’s still alive.”

“Let me see her.” Sakura demanded.

Shisui gallantly offered a hand. She took it. An instance later she found herself standing in the Uchiha’s main hall as Shisui lifted the seventh tatami on the far right. Sakura landed lightly on the balls of her feet in an underground stone room.

Lying on a bed on the far side was her shishou. She looked different. Unable to manipulate chakra while unconscious, Tsunade’s constant Henge had dropped, reveal a frail looking woman in her fifties, complete with wrinkles and honey blonde hair that lost its luster. Sakura had never seen her shishou this exposed, this weak. She looked like a gust of wind would knock the remaining life out of her.

“How did you convince everyone that she’s dead?”

“You already know that each Uchiha’s Mangekyō is unique.” Sakura nodded. “Mine’s Kotoamatsukami. It’s the ultimate genjutsu. Sai fetched me as soon as Danzou gave him the orders to kill Tsunade-sama. A couple of false memories, and one doctor and three nurses swear they did everything they could to save the Hokage when she flat lined. Since they believe it actually happened, Danzou cannot sense a lie.”

“Wish you would use it on Danzou.”

“My too, Pinky. But it'll be ten years before I can use it again.” She nodded again.

“I don’t know what I’ll be able to do. Brain injuries are delicate. It’s easier to keep someone alive than it is to bring them out of a coma.” She voiced softly.

She jerked when he placed a hand on her shoulder. “We don’t expect you to do anything, Sakura-chan. You’re not here to create a miracle. Tsunade-sama will return when she is ready.”

Itachi stepped out of the shadows. “We can hide you here. Our clan owes you more than one debt. We will make sure that Danzou does not find you.”

“Thank you, Itachi, Shisui.” She punched Shisui on his injured arm.

“What was that for?” he yelped.

“For letting me think she was dead.”

Sakura collapsed into the wooden chair at her shishou’s bedside, gently folding one of her hand within her own and resting the upper half of her body open the bed, almost instantly falling into an
exhausted sleep.

The two Uchihas retreated, carefully concealing the entrance, leaving no sign of the secret room’s existence to anyone who did not bear a Sharingan eye.

-SAKURA-

Sakura wished it was as easy as flipping a switch in the brain. She tenderly withdrew her chakra. A simple scan found nothing wrong. Tsunade’s brain was perfectly functional, just not awake. She could not find anything that was causing her to remain in a coma, no presence of drugs or somebody else’s chakra, so it had to be natural.

That meant they would have to wait for her to wake on her own.

She wished there was something she could do to speed the process up, but she wasn’t going to risk irreparably damaging Tsunade by fooling around with things she did not understand. She had thought about using her Reverse Creation Rebirth, but the jutsu was designed to be a quick fix for fatal injuries, not bring people out of comas.

Sakura felt as isolated her as she did in Saisei no Haru. She was hidden away again, unable to do anything other than meditate.

‘Pathetic.’ Her mind whispered in a voice that sounded like Sasuke’s. And it was true. The second greatest medical ninja since Tsunade herself, but Sakura couldn’t do anything.

The pinkette clenched her fists. She did not want to hide in the shadows until her team had removed Danzou. She wanted to hunt him down and kill him. For Naruto. For Tsunade-shishou. For herself. Danzou was not good for Konoha.

-SAKURA-

“I want to help.”

The four Uchihas and Genma stopped their debate over how best to free Naruto from the confines of his apartment. Shisui was all for grandstanding. A lone man fighting his way through his guards wearing a fox ANBU mask. His aunt promptly slapped that idea down with a harsh boxing of his ear.

Shisui’s idea had a little merit. It would certainly work best if only one person was retrieving Naruto.

“Let me get Naruto out.”

Mikoto gently laid a hand on her shoulder, which Sakura shrugged off. “It’s too risky for you, Sakura-chan. If Danzou were to catch you.”

The Uchiha Matriarch didn’t need to finish. Everyone in the room knew exactly what would happen if Danzou discovered she was in Konoha.

Sakura wasn’t worried about getting caught. She knew her abilities. She would be able to get in and out of Naruto’s apartment easily. Especially since she had a key; there would be no need for her to sneak in through the window. A simple low level genjutsu would hide her most prominent features, and a stronger one make his sentinels see and hear what they expect; nothing but another quiet night on duty.

She had many reasons for wanting to go. First being she could not remain hidden in this room any
longer. Tsunade-shishou hadn’t sent her to Saisei no Haru to learn senjutsu only for her to hide away. Second, she hadn’t seen Naruto in months, and she wanted to explain personally that the tales Danzou was spewing were lies.

“It makes sense. If you guys do too much, Danzou will get suspicious. He must be somewhat suspicious already if everything that has gone wrong in the last three months only happened when one of you three were involved. But if I break Naruto out, and he knows where all of you are, he might think that Akatsuki got past.”

“While I see the logic, I feel it must be said that we’ve covered our tracks very well so that none of those incidents can be traced back to us, and not everything that’s gone wrong is our doing.” Genma said, affronted. “Some of it was natural.”

“Let me get Naruto.” She repeated. “He trusts me. He’s more likely to listen and come with me than any of you.”

“She’s got a point there captain.” Shisui said.

Sakura turned pleading eyes on Itachi. She saw no sign of tension or annoyance in his body language. The man projected easy neutrality as he turned over her offer in his mind. “You will bring him straight back. Do not waste time talking. Everything that needs to be said can be done here.”

She stopped the motion to throw herself at him by bowing quickly and giving him a quick thank you. He simply motioned to the trap door, indicating that she had better get moving. His warning to return within a half hour was understood; be quick or we will come after you.

Crossing Konoha to Naruto’s shabby apartment was easy. The majority of Danzou’s forces were mounted on the village wall. There were none in the village itself, except for those surrounding Naruto’s home.

As an extra precaution, she cast a henge on herself. In case her genjutsu was dispelled, she would still have the long brown hair, plain face, and clothes of a civilian. The Demonic Illusion: False Surroundings Technique would take care of the ninja outside Naruto’s apartment. All they would see is an empty street, closed doors, and no lights.

A flick of her wrist turned the key in the lock and she slipped inside. His apartment was a disaster, but that was nothing new. Sakura stuck to the walls so as to not trip. She dropped in front of his bedroom door.

She didn’t even get a hand around the doorknob before she was pressed against the wall with a kunai at her throat.

“Who’s there?”

“Naruto, what the hell are you doing up? And put the kunai down.”

“Sakura-chan?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yes, it’s me. We need to get you out of here. Leave a clone behind.”

“But. . what are you doing here? Baa-chan,” he choked out his nickname for Tsunade, “she said you were sent to Blood Prison.”

“Not now, Naruto. Shadow clone, now.” She ordered. The second Naruto entered the bedroom and she dragged the original out the nearest window. He tried to ask her again how she ended up
in his apartment but she silenced him. “Be quiet and follow me.”

“Why are we going to the Uchiha compound?”

“In a minute, Naruto. I promise we’ll explain everything once we’re there.”

“We?”

His question was ignored once more as she ushered him into the main hall and under the tatami mat. Naruto stared dumbfounded at the Uchihas.

“What’s going on here, Sakura-chan? What’s with the super secret meeting in an underground room lit by lanterns? Is that Baa-chan?” He asked, spotting the bed.

“It is!” He accused. “Just what the hell is going on here?”

“Please, Naruto. Just calm down and hear us out, okay?” Sakura begged her teammate.

“Give me the short story.”

“The short story? I never went to Blood Prison. Danzou is the biggest traitor I’ve ever met. He wants me dead. He tried to kill Tsunade-shishou. And he was going to try to remove the Kyuubi from you and turn one of his followers into the Nine-Tail’s Jinchuuriki.”

Naruto blinked twice as he tried to process the most convoluted conspiracy ever created. “The long story, please?”

The long story took two hours to explain, mostly because of the blonde’s interruptions. It started with Danzou’s history that Fugaku dug up. Feelings of inferiority allowed to fester after a mission in which he was too afraid to act a decoy as Hiruzen Sarutobi was and the consequent not being chosen as the Third Hokage because of it. Danzou vowed to claim the title himself someday, and founded Root in order to do so.

Sakura quickly recapped how Danzou saw her as in the way and placed Sai on their team to kill her and how he tried to sic the Akatsuki on her, and when that failed, sentencing her to Hōzuki-jō. That set Naruto off and it took a couple minutes of persuasion to keep him from trying to kill Danzou himself. Although he had been pleased to learn that she was learning senjutsu too. (“I can’t wait to spar you, Sakura-chan. It will be the coolest fight ever!”) She also told him how Sai helped save Tsunade when Danzou ordered he kill her in hopes that Naruto would forgive Sai’s half-hearted attempt on her own life.

Itachi took it from there, explaining how, in his preparations for war, Danzou wanted a Jinchuuriki completely subservient to him. Naruto was to be taken to a remote facility where the Kyuubi would be removed and re-caged inside someone Danzou controlled.

At the end, Naruto was pensive. “I can’t believe all this. What do we do now?”

Fugaku rose. “You will remain hidden here with Sakura and Tsunade-sama. When Konoha has moved to the Allied headquarters in the Land of Lightning we will have you moved from here to a secret island of Kumo’s to train with their Jinchuuriki. Until then, we do nothing. We follow Danzou’s orders.”

The meeting adjourned. The Uchihas and Genma left. The occupancy of the hidden room increased to three. It was a good thing there was already a second cot for Naruto. The blonde was a restless sleeper and Sakura was not in the mood to be kicked in her sleep.
“And happy belated birthday, Sakura-chan.”

Sakura groaned. It was official, her birthdays sucked. The last two of three had been spent in isolation and fear of being killed.

“Go to sleep, idiot.”

-ANBU-

It was mid-May, two weeks after Naruto had joined the secret club of wanted shinobi hiding in the Uchiha’s basement, that Konoha’s soldier left for the battlefield. Calculating in the thousands of shinobi, the equipment, and the distance, Sakura figured they wouldn’t reach headquarters until July at the earliest.

She thanked the stars that Danzou had finally left for war. The pinkette did not think her sanity would last much longer confined in a room with Naruto who felt as equally as useless as she did.

With Danzou out of the village, Naruto could finally be taken to train with Kumogakure’s Jinchuuriki.

Getting him out of the village was easy. The blonde literally walked right out the front gate. Danzou had spared no shinobi. All were called to war, so Kotetsu Hagane and Izumo Kamizuki were not guarding the front gates to the village.

It was only after he left that Sakura realized how alone she was. Now it was just her and her comatose shishou and her million and one worries.

_How long would this war wage? Who would die because she wasn’t there? How long until Tsunade awoke? When would she be able to join the war? Could the alliance lose?_

She prayed that Tsunade-shishou would wake soon so she could take her position back. Sakura felt uneasy about this war.

-ANBU-

**Sunday, May 19**

Danzou frowned in the safety of his tent. Konoha’s shinobi were less than a week’s travel away from headquarters. They had been ambushed by a battalion of White Zetsus. They were difficult to kill, and succeeded in cutting down Danzou’s forces, nearly three hundred dead. Amongst them was Asuma Sarutobi; Danzou did not care that he was dead. He may have never wanted the title of Hokage, but his death meant that there was no chance that the Council would look to another Sarutobi to lead them. He was not happy with the losses of Inabi and Yakumi. Both men were Uchihas, and he had plans for the Uchiha clan which required them to be alive.

What perturbed him the most was that the attack even occurred. It was a miracle that his shinobi managed to withstand the vicious onslaught. But a surprise attack on his shinobi was not part of the plan.

-ANBU-

**Tuesday, May 21**

Sakura was distracted from her mediation by a low groan. She opened one eye to scan her surroundings, only to scream and launch herself at Tsunade.
“You’re awake!” She sobbed.

“Sakura?” Said female handed Tsunade a glass of water, which the Sannin grabbed with shaky hands and drank with Sakura’s assistance. “Where are we?”

Sakura sat in the chair by her beside, preparing herself to give the long explanation of everything that happened from Naruto’s defeat of Pein to the world going to war. Tsunade listened silently, seeming to age even more as she detailed all of Danzou’s acts.

For the next three days, Sakura did not meditate. Instead she gave her chakra to Tsunade. When she was recovered, the pair set out for Kumogakure.

-WEDNESDAY, MAY 22-

Danzou found himself displeased once more.

Konoha had reached Allied headquarters with no further incidences. The five Kages and Mifune reconvened to discuss the formation of divisions and set down the chain of command. Initially he had wanted to be the head of the alliance, but after the Raikage had been named, Danzou realized it was for the best. The position would have been too restrictive. He would have been confined to headquarters indefinitely.

But, as the Regimental Leader, he would be making the decisions. He would control the war. Intelligence may be sent to command central, but Danzou would be making the final decisions. He had been prepared to accept the position, for he never thought that someone else would be chosen. He was the second oldest Kage present. After the Tsuchikage, he had the most experience, so it only made sense that he was put in command of the army.

Contrary to Danzou’s plans, the other three Kages had elected the Kazekage as the Regimental Commander of the Allied Shinobi Forces. It was baffling. The Kazekage was the youngest of all the Kages; only sixteen. What did he know of war?

Perhaps it was time for him to alter the plan. He summoned his Root.

Seven shinobi instantly appeared, kneeling before him.

“The time has come. To ensure Konoha’s survival, I have made a deal with Madara. I am currently in the possession of the Edo Tensei summoning jutsu. In order to reanimate the five previous Hokages, five of you need to be sacrificed.”

Danzou unfolded the scrolls prepared with the DNA of Konoha’s previous five Kages.

“Kuchiyose: Edo Tensei!”

Four of his five sacrifices screamed as ash and dust encased them, using their bodies to revive the first through fourth Hokages. Tsunade had not been revived,

“I did not think you possible of betrayal, Sai.”

“I have not betrayed my Hokage, Danzou-sama,” the boy replied calmly.

“Then why does Tsunade live?”

“Because your vision of Konoha is wrong. Konoha does not need a secret organization that hides in the shadows proclaiming to protect her. The missions you gave us had nothing to do with
Konoha’s safety. The village is not as weak as you believe it to be. The emotions and bonds you train us to lose make Konoha stronger.”

Danzou narrowed his visible eye. His vision was misguided? “I do not allow traitors.”

His other two loyal Root immediately turned their katana on Sai. The boy had clearly expected such a move for he was easily rid of both of them. Sai then turned to Danzou. “I cannot let you live. You threaten Naruto’s and Sakura’s dreams and the dreams of those I care about.”

Danzou scoffed. Dreams were for cowards not willing to act. He felt no regret as he impaled Sai in the heart. The boy had betrayed Root, betrayed him. Even if he had not, Danzou still would have killed him. Root had served its purpose.

He sealed the four Hokages into coffins and left the body behind. He no longer needed to play up the ruse of being on the Alliance’s side. Madara was going to give him the eyes of every Uchiha that perished. Danzou hoped that Shisui was one of them. He had heard many rumors of what his Mangekyo was capable of.

-Anbu-

Saturday, May 25

“Where is the Hokage?” The Raikage growled. “We do not have time to waste waiting for old men.”

“Show respect for your elders, boy.” The Tsuchikage snapped. His back gave an ominous snap as well.

“You shouldn’t even be here. It is long past the time to hand the title of Tsuchikage to someone younger.”

“I have plenty of experience with war.” Onoki defended.

“But not as much as I.”

Four Kages, Inoichi, Shikaku, Darui, Kitsuchi, Kakashi, Mifune, and the Kages’ assistants turned to stare at the blonde in the doorway.

“Uncanny timing, Tsunade-sama,” Kakashi smiled with his eye. “You too, Sakura. Kind of eerie how both you and Naruto return just before a war breaks out. Perhaps it’s an omen of good luck.” He said to the pink haired kunoichi that had trailed through the doors after the Hokage.

“Tsunade! Where is your Hokage?”

“I am the Godaime Hokage.” Tsunade snarled at A. “Danzou was not, and never will be, Hokage.”

“While I am pleased to have another female Kage present, I’m afraid I do not understand. Wasn’t Danzou named the Rokudaime Hokage because you were comatose?” Mei asked.

“He tried to have me murdered in order to become Hokage. Unfortunately for him, my shinobi are loyal to me, not a usurper.”

“Just take your seat, Hokage.” The five Konoha shinobi glared at the Raikage for his rudeness. “We need to start this war council before the Akatsuki strikes again.”
“Wait a minute, Raikage-sama. The leader of this alliance was decided without me. I think we should take the time to reevaluate.”

“Reevaluate?” A uttered. “We are currently at WAR! We don’t have time to reevaluate. We need to be preparing, not soothing your wounded pride.” He slammed both palms into the table with enough force to shake it.

“That,” she said pointedly as she took the empty seat, “is the first reason you’re not fit to be our leader. You are too emotional, too quick to anger, and react without thinking.”

A stood, drawing himself up to his full height. “This is not up for debate, Hokage. Kumo is the only country that does not have an Akatsuki representative, nor has it ever employed them.”

“That is not true. Konoha has never used the Akatsuki.” Tsunade argued. “And one man who should be long dead does not count as having someone from Konoha in the Akatsuki.”

“He founded the damn organization!” the Raikage roared.

“That is insignificant. The point is my village has never hired Akatsuki either, and not having hired them does not make you worthy of leading this alliance. And it is your warmongering actions that necessitated the need of a criminal organization like the Akatsuki. I should kill you now for your crimes against my village.”

“It has already been decided!”

Mifune interrupted. “I think it would be wise to reconsider. Each Kage can put forth a nomination for the position and then we can calmly discuss why each candidate should or should not be chosen. Let’s start with Wind.”

“I nominate Tsunade-sama.” Gaara intoned. “I was the Jinchuuriki of the Shukaku. I know just how dangerous the Akatsuki are. I died when the demon was extracted. Previously I have requested the collaboration of your countries to fight this threat, but only Tsunade-sama responded.”

“I, too, vote for the Hokage. Konoha is well known for being a peaceful nation. Who better to lead a war that is fighting for the peace of the entire world?” Mei agreed.

“I think we should just let the Raikage keep it.” Ōnoki said. “Peace had no place in war.”

“Alright, seeing as both Hokage and Raikage will vote for their selves, Raikage-sama, tell us why you should keep the position.”

“Because I will not hesitate to do what is necessary. Can you tell me, Hokage, that your ninja won’t hesitate if they have to fight against their own?”

“Would yours?” Tsunade asked angrily. “Danzou and Madara are traitors. I guarantee that my village would be the first to attack.”


“Simply put, I do not trust Kumogakure.”

A opened his mouth to retaliate and was stopped by the samurai leader’s raised hand.

“To start, your Kinkaku Force killed our Second Hokage during the First Shinobi World War.
And this was after our First Hokage divided the tailed beast amongst the other villages in attempt to create peace. Which plays into my second point, despite having two of your own Jinchuuriki, you tried to kidnap our only one. You wouldn’t even have Jinchuuriki if it wasn’t for our generosity.

“You have tried repeatedly to steal Konoha’s kekkei genkai, once again using the guise of a peace treaty to work your way in. You tried to steal a Hyuuga child, and when her father rightly killed the kidnapper, Kumo, claiming no knowledge of his intentions, demanded we hand over her father’s corpse. You are entirely too militant. Relentless in your efforts to amass power and techniques. It was your actions that drove other countries to employ the Akatsuki.”

The Raikage bristled at her accusation, but Tsunade wasn’t done yet. “As for why Konoha should head the alliance, Konoha is the only village to have fought in all three of the previous wars. And we’ve come out on top every time.”

“Kumo fought in the Third War.”

“No. You participated in skirmishes hoping to gain shinobi with unique talents. And the battles you fought against Konoha shinobi you lost. I distinctly remember you being unable to beat Minato.” Tsunade corrected.

“I think I have heard enough.” Mifune defused the high tension. “I believe the Hokage should head the alliance.”

“Now,” Tsunade began, folding her fingers in front of her and ignoring A’s mutterings, “we need to divide the shinobi.”

“I think it would be best to have a mix of all five nations in each division,” the Mizukage suggested, “seeing as this is an alliance. It serves no purpose to have five separate armies. We should also combine our Intelligence to locate Akatsuki’s base of operations.”

“Also, something needs to be done to protect Naruto and Killer B.” Gaara stated. “The Jinchuuriki need to remain out of Madara’s reach, or we fight this war pointlessly. Danzou has probably confined Naruto to the Leaf Village. It would be all too easy for Madara to capture him.”

“That has already been taken care of. Sakura told me that Naruto had been snuck out of the village and to Island Turtle with Killer B before Danzou was ready to move out.”

“What? I was not aware of this!” the Raikage yelled.

“Forgive me, Raikage-sama, but we contacted Killer B-san directly.” Itachi calmly interjected.

With that matter settled, the Kages began the tedious process of assigning 80,000 shinobi from five villages into divisions based on their abilities. The First Division was composed of mid-range fighters, headed by Cloud’s Darui. Rock’s Kitsuchi lead the Second Division made of short range fighters. The Third Division was a conglomeration of both short and mid-range fighters, commanded by Kakashi Hatake. Gaara was in charge of the Fourth Division consisting of long range fighters. Mifune was placed in charge of the final division. The Fifth Division was the special battle division.

It was decided, after minutes of furious arguments, that Gaara would be named the Regimental Commander. Firstly, because he was the only Kage commanding a division, and secondly, because Tsunade was of the opinion that someone young who was open to change and was adaptable was needed. It was a point in Gaara’s favor that he was much more level headed than the Raikage.
There were also a few supporting divisions. The Logistical Support and Medical Division under the eye of Shizune, all medic-nin not on the battlefield were to be stationed at the medical camp; Kankuro’s Surprise Attack Division; a Sensor Division commanded by Ao; and an Intelligence Division Head by Inoichi Yamanaka stationed at headquarters. Shikaku Nara was named the Chief Strategist, for there was no one smarter than a Nara.

Mei would lead a squad to protect the Daimyos, who would be moving from safe house to safe house. Once assured that her squad could provide adequate protection, she would return. It was a political nightmare to name a Kage. They could not afford to have to replace a Daimyo in the middle of a war.

The meeting lasted well into the early hours of the morning. Tsunade carefully structured each division so that every village had at least one of their shinobi in the chain of command. The members of the Daimyo Protection Squad were summoned immediately and sent out. The rest of the war council retired to their tents to catch a few hours of sleep.

Danzou’s disappearance was forgotten about until the morning.

-ANBU-

Sunday, May 26

Sakura was present when her shishou received her answers about Danzou.

She wished she hadn’t been.

The old war hawk had switched sides, according to Sai’s message. And he had used Orochimaru’s jutsu to revive the previous Hokages. It was a huge moral breaker for Konoha shinobi. To know that they would have to fight the very shinobi they revered as their leaders and swore to protect.

The worst part for Sakura? Danzou had murdered Sai. As soon as she was able, the rosette retreated to her tent pitched next to her shishou’s for a good cry. After the whole rescue the Kazekage debacle in which she thought he tried to kill her, Sakura had distanced herself from Sai, unsure if he truly meant to kill her as he had been ordered or if he was using the opportunity to get around the Cursed Seal. Either way, she had not repaired her relationship, platonic or romantic, with him. And now he was dead.

Sakura was certain that she hadn’t loved Sai. It was more that she enjoyed the easy camaraderie between them. Being with Sai had been easy, unlike when she dated Neji. But she had definitely cared deeply for him.

All of a sudden the war seemed more real to her. She had been expecting casualties. They could not be avoided. She knew that one of them could be someone she knew, but for Sai to already be dead when the first battle hadn’t even been fought, hit her hard.

How many more of her loved ones would fall in this war?

-ANBU-

Division assignments were distributed the next day. Sakura was placed in the Third Division along with Itachi, Shisui, Gai-sensei, and Lee. The only one from her ANBU team not present was Genma who was given Daimyo protection detail.

Sakura was also placed in the Logistical Support and Medical Division; the proxy leader after Shizune. And when she was not busy in either division, she was to report to Tsunade-shishou to
act as her assistant for both the war and with leading the Leaf Village. Danzou had entrusted his hard won village to no one, so now Tsunade had to juggle managing the war and Konohagakure.

Gaara took to being the Regimental Leader with practiced ease. Sakura had worried about his appointment. She understood that Tsunade wanted someone not stuck in their ways to lead the army, but was the Kazekage the right choice? He was the same age as her and Naruto. And she could safely say that neither of them would have been capable of commanding an army.

But Gaara was. He wasn’t at all like the Raikage, demanding and overbearing. The Kazekage humbled himself before the army, decrying himself too inexperienced and far too young to lead. He asked for their strength and received it with raucous cheering.

He had further solidified the alliance by confessing how one Konoha shinobi changed the way he lived, and that because he no longer lived solely for hatred, for himself that he had rose to become the youngest Kazekage in Suna’s history. There was no longer a division between the villages; they were one alliance that called themselves shinobis.

Gaara had won the loyalty of 80,000 shinobi. They would now fight to their last breath to defend Naruto and Killer B.

Sakura’s first week at war was spent mostly running errands for Tsunade-shishou. She summoned commanders, captains, and anyone else when Tsunade wanted second opinions and clarifications. She took messages, summarized and prioritized them, and passed them on to the Hokage. Tsunade often dispatched her to bring reports to Gaara and the other commanders when she made changes. Sakura was also the in between for Shizune, who kept Tsunade informed of every shinobi that came through the medical camp and kept her up to date on the day to day operations. She practically lived in the war council tent with the other Kages.

Sakura had not been sent out yet, but that did not mean that the Alliance was waiting for Madara to make the first move. Gaara had ordered several scouting groups to be formed, generally small in numbers of shinobi capable of spying unseen, like Hyuugas, to gather Intel on the enemy’s positions, tactics and numbers.

The rosette did not like the reports that came back. It was an army of White Zetsu clones, and from observation, they were nothing like shadow clones or elemental clones. They were solid and could take damage without disappearing. So far they were 100,000 strong and still growing. She had to blink to dispel the image of Yamato being held captive to create these monsters.

That was a huge concern for Gaara. He had a limited resource of shinobis to work with while the enemy could continue to pour out this clones. If nothing was done they would quickly be outnumbered.

The only good thing that Sakura could see was that with numbers so large, they would have to move on ground. The Alliance would be able to track their movements. And they hadn’t shown themselves capable of using jutsus yet, which definitely benefited the Alliance.

Being at war changed things, changed people. Sakura saw it most in her friends. Kakashi was never late. Never early, but still didn’t take three hours to answer a summons. Although he brought his collection of Icha Icha with him. It did an amazing job of relaxing the shinobi he commanded. The great Kakashi of the Sharingan eye wasn’t very fearsome when he was giggling like a schoolgirl behind an erotic novel. His laid back attitude only served to add to the unimpressive image.

“I take a couple weeks of a well-deserved break and the world goes to hell. SAKURA! Bring me Hatake! AND MORE SAKE!!” Tsunade shouted from her connected tent.
And then there were some things that would never change.

-ANBU-

Monday, June 3

Gaara deployed their first troops the next day. The First Division was stationed along the northwest coast of the Land of Lightning in case the Akatsuki tried to send some of their troops overseas. The Second and Third Divisions advanced towards the border of the Land of Frost, and the Fourth Division went to the southern border. Mifune’s division was aligned in a wide arc, prepared to race to the aide of any division that might be overwhelmed.

Sakura was surprised how much waiting was involved in war. From the tales she had heard in the academy it was made out to be a never ending clash between two opposing forces. There never seemed to be any down time, or waiting in trees to jump down upon enemies.

She had chosen to stick close to her sensei. Kakashi’s hatred of hospitals was legendary, and it would make her life easier if she could heal him on the battlefield if given the chance. She glanced at him, silently asking how much longer they would hide there. He roughly signaled back.

‘We stay here until we fight or we’re called away.’

Sakura prepared herself for the long haul. Madara had not made a move since his siege on Konoha before they were at Kumo. She knew it was wise of Gaara to wait for the Akatsuki to make the first move, but she detested waiting.

Her tree shook with the force of an explosion. A ferocious wind whipped her pink locks about her face. Dirt clouded her vision. Smoke spiraled into the sky. The forest lit on fire.

Sakura tightened the glove on her right hand. It was time to fight.

-ANBU-

Tsunade frowned as Inoichi relayed status reports of each division. The first through third divisions had encountered enemies. Two separate platoons of White Zetsu clones. The First Division had been completely blindsided in the attack. The clones had emerged straight out of the water and not by ship as she was expecting.

They clearly needed to learn more about this enemy. What else were they capable of? They clearly had no need to breath.

More concerning was the Akatsuki’s no show. She had expected them to lead the armies of White Zetsus. She had told such feelings to Gaara. They had organized the divisions the way they did in anticipation of Akatsuki’s participation. Was Madara going to hold them back until the end of the war? Take down the Alliance in one fell swoop?

“Hokage-sama! Deidara has been spotted. He’s engaged the Second Division.”

“Link me to the Kazekage.”

-ANBU-

Darui surveyed the now silent coastline.

These White Zetsus were unlike anything he had ever seen. They had not expected them to come from under the water. Or their ability to shift limbs into weapons.
But his division had rallied, rose up and fought against them. His black lightning attacks combined with his water release made his jutsus all the more devastating. The First Division had won this battle, but at a high cost. He had lost at least 3,000 shinobi.

He watched silently as the shinobi from Konoha gathered their dead and constructed a pyre, as was the Land of Fire’s custom.

The White Zetsu clones were also being stacked to be burned. It wouldn’t be elegant though. The First Division was going to light them on fire and watch them burn.

“Excuse me, sir, but could you move your foot? You’re standing on one of them.”

“Sorry. You can’t have this one.”

The two Suna shinobi exchanged confused looks.

He put his weight on the foot on top of the White Zetsu, pressing harder onto its chest. “This one’s for the medic base.”

-ANBU-

The battlefield was chaotic.

Multiple explosions rent the area around them. The air was filled with dirt, debris and the screams of dying shinobi. The stench of burnt flesh would never be forgotten.

The bombs mostly targeted the Second Division. The short range fighters were being decimated by the onslaught. Sakura retreated to safety behind the lines, performing triage healing as shinobi were carried back. Mostly she treated for smoke inhalation and third degree burns. She told those with first and second degree burns that they would have to be treated at the medical base.

She cursed as she ducked a large projectile of rock. Kitsuchi had ordered rock walls formed to protect the troops from the explosions. Apparently they were not strong enough to withstand Deidara’s bombs.

And the situation was only compounded by the horde of White Zetsus. They fought mindlessly and were extremely durable. She had punched one clean through a row of trees. It picked itself back up and leapt upon the closest shinobi.

Bombs rained down on their heads. In the shape of clay birds and spiders, Deidara dropped bombs in between the ranks from his perch on a much large clay bird flying above.

“Wind users! Cut those bombs up or blow them at the clones!” Kakashi yelled.

Cries of “Futon!” preceded a torrent of wind jutsus that redirected Deidara’s bombs into the White Zetsu army. ‘Oddly enough’, Sakura thought, ‘they smell like a burning forest.’

“Art is an EXPLOSION!”

“Clear the area! Now!”

Sakura looked up from the injured Kiri shinobi she was healing to see a bomb the size of an eagle swooping down. She hauled the injured shinobi over her shoulder and used the Earth Style: Hiding Like a Mole Technique to get them safely away and underground.

She nearly had a heart attack when she saw the bombs hidden beneath the earth. It certainly
explained why Deidara’s attacks were having a more devastating effect than they should have with him just dropping them.

The most recent bomb was far enough away to not set off the ones near Sakura. She promptly released her jutsu and searched for Kakashi’s chakra signature. Sakura used a Kawarimi to switch the Kiri ninja with a rock near a medic-nin and nailed Kakashi in the arm with the rock.

“He’s planted landmines!”

The jounin’s normal eye widened. “I need the lightning users to direct raiton attacks at the ground to neutralize the landmines!”

Dozens of Kumo shinobi handled it, nearly obliterating the ground beneath them in their zeal. ‘At least they were thorough.’

“The best thing about war,” Kakashi said casually, blazing red eye trained on his troops, “I get to pilfer jutsus from other countries and they can’t raise a fuss.”

“You sound entirely too cheerful about that, sensei. How often do you pick fights just copy new jutsus?” Sakura accused.

Kakashi ignored her, driving a Chidori through a clone’s chest.

-ANBU-

Deidara observed the forest from above. His art hand never been more beautiful. He found Kakashi Hatake to be a formidable opponent. With his Sharingan eye and lightning nature, he was just the person to give him trouble. Hatake was predicting his attacks before he launched them, minimizing the damage of his art. He didn’t know how he had discovered the landmines, but it didn’t matter.

He hadn’t even shown what his art was truly capable of.

-ANBU-

Three Deidaras landed on the ground.

Kakashi did not hesitate. “Chidori!” His lightning encased hand pierced the right most Deidara and the clay clone lost its shape. He was nowhere near quick enough to stop the other two from exploded and he smashed into a tree.

Sakura was at his side instantly. “Are you alright, Kakashi-sensei?”

He waved off his former student’s concern. The scrapes he had were nothing. They didn’t need emergency healing. “We need to retreat. Have Santa Yamanaka send word to Command. Get the Raikage down here.”

Sakura nodded, vanishing and reappearing next to the Yamanaka with long, auburn hair.

Pulling back was his best option right now. His shinobi were short range and mid-range fighters. Useless against Deidara. They would strategically retreat until the Raikage arrived. His speed was only second to his former sensei and he was a lightning user.

“Fall back!” Kakashi ordered.

-ANBU-
“Hokage-sama, Kakashi requests the aide of the Raikage.”

Tsunade nodded. “Go.”

The Raikage was gone.”

-ANBU-

The Raikage appeared abruptly on the battlefield. He didn’t wait for Kakashi’s orders before using a broken tree as a springboard to reach the explosive artist. Kakashi let it go because his plan to deal with Deidara did involve forcing him to the ground, but he was definitely going to report it to the Kazekage and Hokage. A could have potentially ruined a plan Kakashi had by acting on his own.

Deidara had not been expected the Raikage’s appearance. The bomber was thrown from his clay bird. A, lightning chakra cloaking him like a second skin, met him mid-air, punching him straight into the ground.

Kakashi let the two of them duke it out, instead focusing on getting his division to safety.

Deidara crawled out of the whole. “That was impressive, Raikage. But you are no match for my art. True art is a moment of beauty, there one second and gone the next. Katsu!”

The blonde frowned when nothing happened. “So that’s not just a physical manifestation of your chakra.” He said, noticing the flashes of lightning.

The Raikage caught him by the throat. “Where is your base?”

Deidara hung limply. “Art is a bang. KATSU!”

A flashed away from Deidara as he exploded. “You’ll never catch me with clones. With the famous Yellow Flash dead, there is no shinobi faster than I. You are weak! And the weak will be crushed.”

“My art is not weak, un.” Deidara claimed, stepping out from behind a tree. The Raikage watched as the bomber ate his own clay. I’ll show you true beauty. Fine art is the beauty of that single fleeting moment of explosion.”

The Raikage lifted Deidara and slammed him into the ground. The blonde spat out a huge volume of clay that became a giant replica of himself.

“That won’t work. Earth nature chakra is weak against lightning.”

“KATSU!”

The Raikage was thrown away by the blast. “How?”

Deidara used the sword he had planted in the ground as leverage to get back on his feet. “You used the sword as a grounding rod to siphon off the lightning chakra.”

“You have no appreciation for true art.” Deidara ripped open his black and red Akatsuki cloak, revealing a mouth similar to those on his hand on his chest. He yanked out the thread that sewed it shut, pulling out a large handful of clay with his other hand.

Black lines crawled across his body, like clay cracking from too much heat. “This is my ultimate art. This time I’m going to detonate myself. In death I shall become art itself. No one’s seen an
explosion like this. One that will leave behind a scar on the very earth itself. And then I’ll receive
more admiration for my art than anyone has seen before.”

The Raikage watched transfixed as Deidara’s body blackened and became translucent. “Kakashi!
Get out of here!” He roared. His warning wasn’t necessary. The Second and Third Divisions had
long since retreated. A sea of White Zetsu clones circled A and Deidara, cutting off the Raikage’s
escape.

“This explosion will cover ten kilometers. You can’t run away from this one, Raikage.”

The black lines traveled towards the mouth on his chest, condensing until all there was of Deidara
was a black ball with two white eyes and a jagged mouth floating in front of him. Then the orb
cracked, pure white light breaking out. First one, than many. The mouth opened.

A beam of energy shot miles into the sky, expanding quickly, taking a form that vaguely
resembled a human, destroying everything in a ten kilometer radius. Then it detonated.

-KAAB-

Kakashi watched in a mix of disbelief and awe at the figure that dominate the landscape, and then
with fear when it exploded.

“The fool.” Kakashi was startled by the voice next to him.

“Raikage-sama? How did you survive the blast?”

“I told him I was the fastest shinobi in the world. I pierced him with lightning chakra before
running. It wasn’t enough to completely defuse the bomb, but it significantly reduced its reach.”

“In any case, I’m glad you’re not dead. I think Tsunade-sama wants that honor.”

-KAAB-

The medic encampment was busy. The attack on two fronts had killed thousands of their shinobi,
and there were several hundred being treated. Those from the Second and Third Divisions were
pretty much in the clear. Civilian doctors would treat their burns. The medic-nin focused their
chakra on those wounded by the Zetsus. Sakura conserved her chakra for serious cases,
overseeing Ino as she worked on ones with little to no risk.

Sakura had not seen it, but the Zetsus could morph their body shape, turning arms and legs into
weapons, even merging together to make a stronger Zetsu.

“Sakura.”

“Hai, Shizune?”

“You’ve done enough. Here, take the casualties report to Tsunade-sama.” Sakura looked at the
scroll.

“But I can help. I still have chakra.” She protested.

“There’s not much more you can do, Sakura. Everyone has been seen to. There is only a handful
that might not make it through the night. Everyone else will recover. All we can do now is wait.”

The pinkette nodded. Shizune pressed the scroll into her hand and pushed her out of the tent.

The guards stationed outside the war council tent let her pass, and Sakura bowed, excusing her
late arrival to the Kages, and took her position behind and slightly to the right of Tsunade’s chair, discreetly setting the list of casualties next to her elbow.

Hazel eyes briefly scanned the long list of those that died. There were more from the First and Second Divisions than the Third. Deidara had attacked the Second Division first. The Fourth and Fifth Divisions had not seen battle. This time there wasn’t anyone Sakura knew. She recognized a couple of names from Konoha, but it was no one she knew personally. The one name she did know was Karui because she was one of Killer B’s apprentices.

“Those White Zetsus are a menace.” Kitsuchi stated.

“Deidara certainly did us a favor when he blew himself up.” Kakashi chuckled. “He took a whole battalion of them with him.”

“We need to cut them off at the source.” Sakura looked at Gaara, who had spoken, and was surprised to see Shikamaru standing behind him. Why was her brother standing with the Kazekage? Shouldn’t it be one of his siblings?

“In order to do that we would need to find their base.” The Tsuchikage pointed out. “Can our forces withstand them until we put a halt to their production?”

“We should be able to. We know what their capable of now. It will be harder to catch us by surprise a second time.” Tsunade answered.

Mei spoke. “I think we have a few days in which we can launch search parties. Madara also suffered heavy losses in that attack. Given how much time it took him to amass an army of 100,000, it will take time to replace the clones that he has lost. And that does not account for Deidara’s death. He is now short one Akatsuki member as well.”

“Konoha has the best trackers. I suggest that Neji Hyuuga and Hana Inuzuka be included.”

The Raikage and Tsuchikage bickered with Tsunade about the remaining members of the team until the Hokage simply told them that it was more important that the job got done than they have an equal representation of each nation on the team.

The meeting didn’t last much longer after that. There was really nothing they could do besides confront the White Zetsu army until they stopped their production.

Sakura followed Shikamaru out when they were released. “What were you doing in there with Kazekage-sama?”

“She is calling me Proxy Commander. In the event he’s called away from the Fourth Division I’m in charge. It’s all so troublesome.”

She jokingly punched her brother in the shoulder. He winced. Even her light punches hurt. “Don’t complain, Shikamaru. It’s a huge honor.”

“It’s a lot of work.” He rebutted. “He didn’t even ask me if I wanted it.”

“You deserve it.”

Shikamaru looked sideways at her. It was the first time he had seen his sister in months. Her face radiated with pride for him. “Have you talked to dad yet?”

“No. I’ve seen him, but we’re all so busy. Why?”
“No kidding.” He muttered under his breath. “Mother asked us to pass on a message.”

Sakura stopped and turned to face him expectantly. “First, she knows the claims that you work for Orochimaru are bullshit.” She winced, and Shikamaru commiserated with her. It was never good news when their mother was angry enough to start swearing.

“Second, she says even if it was all lies, you’re still grounded.”

“What?” Sakura exclaimed. “But it wasn’t my fault. Danzou manipulated me! Moved me around like a pawn on a shogi board.”

“She knows. She just doesn’t care. Says you scared twenty years of her life with that stunt.”

“Stunt?” she repeated.

Shikamaru nodded. “So, when we return home, you’re grounded. Which really means you become mom’s slave until she decides to unground you.”

Sakura remained silent. Not because she thought the punishment was unfair, even though it kind of was, Yoshino Nara was a slave driver on her best days, but because Shikamaru had said ‘when.’ Her brother didn’t doubt for a second that they would survive this war intact.

“That said,” the brunette yanked her into a hug, “don’t ever do that again.”

“I promise, Shikamaru. No more disappearing acts.”

-ANBU-

Tuesday, June 4

Sakura returned to the medical tents the next morning. There were more that pulled through the night than those that did not. Since there were no current plans to deploy her division, she saw no harm in healing some of the less serious injuries with chakra. The tents were really overcrowded, so it was for the best that they discharged those that did not need to stay.

The search parties had been sent out before the sun rose. A total of three teams would be trying to find the Akatsuki’s base. They weren’t expected back for a couple of days. Sakura was anticipating negative results. The Akatsuki had been in operation since the Third Shinobi World War and nobody had ever found them. It was the Akatsuki that found you.

With nothing else to do, Sakura opted to scrub in on the autopsy Shizune was performing on a White Zetsu that the First Division brought back. Shizune allowed her in the autopsy tent and the pair worked with an ease born of years of practice. Sakura had often worked with Tsunade’s older apprentice on surgeries, and whenever she was indisposed because of too many bottles of sake.

“I hope you’re well rested, Sakura. We’re in for the long haul. Anything we get out of this could potentially be vitally important information.”

Sakura understood that. Defeating Zetsu would be infinitely easier if they knew everything about him.

She had never laid eyes on the original Zetsu herself, but from what she read in reports and his picture in the Bingo Book, the clone on the table was significantly different in appearance. To start, the clone was completely humanoid in shape, and bore no venus fly-trap like extensions about his head. He had a complete face and defined arms and legs.
There were small spikes protruding from the shoulder and back. A zigzag pattern ran down the midsection to the groin and down each leg. It made it really easy to cut him open, all they had to do was follow the lines.

However, cutting the White Zetsu clone open yielded no results. He was completely hollow inside. It did explain how they were able to move the whole army underwater. The clones were artificial humans, having no need to carry out normal human bodily functions like sleeping or breathing. It also solved the mystery of why they didn’t bleed.

The duo examined the body for several hours, taking breaks often and returning with fresh eyes, but discovered nothing else. When it came time for dinner to be served Shizune insisted the body be stored and they return to the problem another day when they had more information. She noted down any abnormalities, even the ones she and Sakura could not deign a reason for, and had the pinkette run it over to Command. After all, one of the anomalies might be explained after they knew more about what White Zetsu was capable of.

-ANBU-

The next three days were quiet. Deidara’s suicide had put a wrench in Madara’s plans, because the Uchiha had not launched one attack. Gaara reasoned that he was amassing his army again. There was nothing the Alliance could do until the search parties returned.

Sakura and Shizune took another look at the dead White Zetsu clone, but it was another fruitless effort. So the pinkette found herself holed up in her shishou’s tent doing Tsunade’s accursed paperwork. She wanted to pitch Danzou off the Hokage Monument for trying to run the village while at war. Granted, he wasn’t also the Supreme Commander, but did he really think he would have time to run Konoha and fight the Akatsuki?

To be fair, Sakura was sure that Tsunade wouldn’t have needed her help if she wasn’t still recovering.

-ANBU-

Itachi glared at Shisui as his cousin made Sakura laugh.

Despite being placed in the same division, neither Uchiha had seen Sakura since the girl had arrived at Headquarters in tow with Tsunade-sama. Itachi had something that he needed to say to Sakura, so he arranged to be walking by the medic base as she retired for the night.

When he arrived, however, it was to the scene of Sakura and Shisui laughing.

Jealousy flared. He had already warned his cousin off Sakura, stating his own interest in her and that he wished to court her. Shisui had exclaimed Itachi had finally become a man, which Itachi ignored, and promised that he wouldn’t hit on her.

But here he was, flirting with Sakura. Should he wait for their conversation to finish, or politely interrupt?

“Good night, Shisui.”

“Night, Pinky.”

Shisui strolled away, leaving Sakura to stare at his back with a small amount of shock. Itachi stepped up beside the rosette. “Sakura.”

Said girl whirled around. “Itachi! You startled me. Do you need to talk to me too?”
“Stay away from Shisui.”


“I don’t want you near him.” Itachi said flatly.

“Itachi, you can’t tell me who I can talk to. That’s my decision. Shisui’s my friend and I’ll hang out with him if I want to.” She glared.

“I like you, Sakura.” Sakura started at him gobsmacked. “I don’t want you around other men.”

She drew in a large breath angrily. “You can’t order me to not have contact with all the males in my life. Team 7 and our ANBU team are my boys. I protect and help them and they do the same for me.”

“I do not want them to interfere.” Itachi persisted.

“Itachi, I don’t know about this.”

The Uchiha felt like his heart had dropped to his stomach. “I understand.” He said. And he did. She must have feelings for someone else. “You need time to grieve.” He was lying to himself, trying to put distance between them without it seeming like he was running away.

“What? No!” Sakura shouted. Itachi stopped his retreat. “I didn’t love Sai. Not in that manner. Maybe like a brother. But I don’t want to rush into a relationship. I don’t exactly have a good track record. And we’re at war.”

“We do not have to rush. We can take it as slow as you need.”

Sakura bit her bottom lip, still uneasy. “I can’t right now. What if one of us doesn’t survive? Or what if it’s different when we go home?”

“Do not worry about that now. Tomorrow is another day. Let’s take this one day at a time.”

Itachi didn’t wait for her to speak her agreement. He could see it sparkling in her eyes. He dipped her head back and kissed her. Long and hard.

They broke apart, panting.

“That wasn’t slow.”

“I couldn’t resist.” Itachi murmured huskily.

-ANBU-

Sakura stood weak kneed as she watched the Uchiha heir walk away.

‘Oh stars.’ The kiss had been nothing like she expected.

Kissing Itachi was fireworks in her mouth, lava melting her brain, passionate. With Neji it was almost mechanical. He knew Sakura wanted it and acquiesced, but there were no feelings. Sai’s kisses were feather light, inquisitive and curious. She had to say, she much preferred Itachi’s.

When Shisui had halted her outside the medical tent to warn her about Itachi, she thought he was joking. Her captain wasn’t interested in her. She was just his little brother’s once teammate and his new teammate.
Sakura had been caught completely off guard when he confessed. From working with the man, she knew Itachi was all about duty first. Emotions played no part.

Clearly she was wrong about him. She had thought Itachi to be as unemotional as his brother. She couldn’t have been happier to be proven wrong.

Her gut twisted. Sakura didn’t know exactly how she felt about Itachi Uchiha, but there was definitely a fire for him. She wouldn’t deny it. She had been sneaking peaks at him whenever she could since her first mission with him. Apparently she hadn’t been as unobtrusive as she thought.

ANBU

Saturday, June 8

‘The rumor mill must have worked really hard last night.’

By the time Sakura reported for duty, all five camps knew about her newest relationship.

“Itachi, huh.” Tsunade had greeted her. “Nice choice. Good thing Danzou’s not around to insist you transfer to a different team. Your team is my most effective ANBU team.” Thankfully Tsunade-shishou could not torment her due to the return of Neji’s search party. As Sakura had suspected, his team reported back no presence of the Akatsuki in the northern part of the Land of Lightning.

Sakura suspected Shisui was at fault. Itachi was a highly private person, and she most certainly did not blab to everyone that she was now dating him. Shisui had been the only other person to know about Itachi’s feelings for her.

She didn’t know how he knew she had accepted his advances. Itachi would kill Shisui before he told him something that personal. He probably assumed that no one in their right mind would reject Itachi Uchiha. It was totally presumptive and arrogant, but that fit Shisui to a tee.

ANBU

The war front was the perfect place for a typical whirlwind romance.

Itachi sought her out in her every spare moment. Whenever she stepped outside a tent, he was there waiting for her. He escorted her around camp, lunched with her at the medic base, and kissed her good night.

Actually, he kissed her every opportunity he got. Sometimes he orchestrated opportunities.

Like the day after they got together. June 9th was Itachi’s twenty-second birthday. Shisui pulled what he called ‘birthday privileges,’ convincing the Hokage to allow his ANBU team to engage in an all-out spar far from prying eyes. Needless to say, the Uchiha heir thoroughly ran them into the ground, as he had every other time Shisui convinced the team to participate in one of these battles.

Itachi’s idea of ‘birthday privileges’ was declaring that, as it was his day, anything he said went. Needless to say, he abused the privilege to demand endless kisses from his girlfriend. She didn’t complain.

But Sakura enjoyed it. Itachi was a perfect gentleman, and he really was letting her set the pace. She had something to look forward to instead of worrying about her friends and family that were deployed while she was not.

Most of their time together was spent talking. Sakura was actually surprise by how much of
Most of their time together was spent talking. Sakura was actually surprised by how much of a conversationalist Itachi was. He had a very soothing voice. It lulled her to sleep on occasion.

-ANBU-

Tuesday, June 18

If the first time is happenstance, the second time is coincidence, and the third is conspiracy, what the hell was it when she encountered White Zetsu, Deidara, and Kisame? How does one person cross paths with two-thirds of the most dangerous criminal organization out there?

Sakura decided she must have a radar detection system that only picked up Akatsuki. That or she was a magnet for the insane.

Even without Danzou’s encouragement she had no trouble finding herself in confrontations with the supposedly elusive members of the Akatsuki. Well, it was more like in spite of Danzou’s aide. Every Akatsuki she faced was because of pure chance or Konoha was looking for them. The Akatsuki had never gone out of their way to hunt her down.

Sakura thought she ought to be grateful that he was too busy swinging his massive sword and scattering the Alliance to realize that the pink haired kunoichi that had taken down a third of their organization was present.

Her invisibility did not last long.

“Leaf Hurricane!” Lee cried as he dealt a kick to a White Zetsu clone at her back.

Sakura whirled around, uttering a quick thanks to Lee for having her back. Then she saw the blue Akatsuki member looking in their direction.

In the blink of an eye he was standing a sword’s length away from them. A sword that he raised and pointed the broad tip at Lee.

“You! Bushy Brows!”

“Me?” Lee asked.

“You don’t remember me?”

“I do not believe we have ever met, Akatsuki-san.”

“You kicked me in the face!”

Sakura stared in disbelief. She could not believe the Lee had fought this Akatsuki before. Or that he let Lee kick him in the face and live.

“What is this, Lee? You kicked Kisame Hoshigaki in the face? Way to show your youth, Lee.”

Sakura was blinded by two identical green jumpsuits with orange leg warmers.

“There are two of you?” The Akatsuki asked.

“But Gai-sensei, I have never met Kisame before,” protested Lee.

“It is not youthful to lie.” Gai chided his doppelganger.

“I am not lying, Gai-sensei.” Lee insisted.

“I believe you, Lee.”
The Akatsuki swung his sword to point at Gai. “Who the hell are you?”

He struck his good guy pose, cocking a hip and fisting his right hand. He pointed the thumb at himself, gave Kisame a wide grin of teeth so white they ‘ pinged ’ and a wink and proclaimed, “I am Konoha’s Sexy Green Beast! Gai Maito!”

“You are burning with the flames of Youth, Gai-sensei!”

“And you don’t remember me?” Kisame asked again.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t remember you. Are you sure it was me?”

“I know what will make you remember.” Kisame brought his sword back with one hand and slammed it downed on the spot where the three Konoha ninja had been standing with surprising speed and force.

Nothing was fast enough to match Gai-sensei and Lee.

“Thank you, Lee.” He had pulled Sakura out of harm’s way.

“Never worry, my lovely Sakura blossom. I shall always protect you.” Lee declared.

“Are you ready, Lee? We cannot let Kakashi’s students be the only ones to take down an Akatsuki.”

‘Did you have to say that Gai-sensei? I don’t think shark face over there even noticed I existed until now.’ She halfheartedly thought about reminding Gai-sensei that Sasuke had never fought an Akatsuki member. Then she decided against it. If Gai wanted to turn this into one of his legendary challenges against Kakashi, Sakura was all for it. There was a nice huddle of White Zetsu clones she could put her fist through.

-ANBU-

“Come, Lee! Let us show what extensive dedication is capable of!”

“Yes, Gai-sensei!”

“Leaf Coiling Whirlwind!” Both Konoha shinobi leapt at Kisame, Gai from his left and Lee on his right. Their outstretched legs slammed into the giant wrapped sword. Kisame didn’t even flinch under the force of the blow.

“My turn.” Kisame grinned, showing off a mouth full of shark like teeth. “Water Release: Exploding Water Colliding Wave.” The sharkish man opened his jaw and spat out an endless stream of water. The desert ground beneath them now resembled a small ocean.

Gai hauled Lee, who had been swept off his feet by the rushing water, out and tossed him at Kisame. Lee spun, using the momentum to go into a simple rear spinning low kick, aiming to knock Kisame off his feet.

His opponent evaded by jumping backwards. His gargantuan sword slammed into Lee’s side. “What’s this? Why didn’t Samehada take your chakra?”

“I am a taijutsu master. I cannot use ninjutsu or genjutsu.”

“Well, isn’t that interesting. I think I’m going to enjoy this fight.”
Lee stripped off his orange leg warmers and removed his weights. This was a serious battle against a talented opponent. He could not hold back.

Gai charged Kisame, aiming a powerful lateral kick at his head. “Great Leaf Flash!”

Kisame ducked underneath Gai sailed behind him. Immediately he switched into a spinning back kick. His Leaf Strong Whirlwind was a combination of speed and power, and Gai smashed into Kisame with an overwhelming strength. The Akatsuki flew right into Lee’s attack.

The mini Gai clone kicked Kisame into the air, kicked him a second time in the face, and finished with a drop kick that sent him plummeting into the water.

“Nice Youth Full Power, Lee.” Gai admired the beam of youthful light energy that followed Kisame into the water’s depths.

The two males sprang apart when a ten foot shark erupted out of the water; jaws opened wide and ready to take a vicious bite out of them. Kisame stood nearly twenty feet away, directing a shiver of twelve sharks.

“Here, Lee!”

Lee caught the jug of sake his sensei had thrown. “Are you sure it is alright for me to use this, Gai-sensei? It does not seem wise to drink while we are at war.”

“Go for it, Lee!” He chugged the sake. Instantly his eyes became glazed, his face flushed, and he staggered drunkenly.


“He is not just drinking, my rival.”

“Your rival?” Gai ignored him.

“It is a unique taijutsu style where the more you drink, the drunker you become, and the stronger you get. Lee had perfected the Drunken Fist. Now his attacks are impossible to predict and much stronger. He is fighting from muscle memory and holding nothing back. Show him the strength of your youth, Lee!”

“Suiton: Daikōdan no Jutsu!” A shark formed from the water. Kisame thrusts both hands forward, directing the water shark to attack Lee. Then he formed a second one to attack Gai.

Lee punched his in the nose. The shark bent in half, regained its shape, and swam around for a second try. The one sicced on Gai came at him from underneath. It tried to swallow him whole, but Gai prevented its mouth from closing with his legs.

Impatient, Kisame sent the twelve sharks that had been circling him. Gai dispatched them through sheer strength. Lee avoided his by swerving and swaying and stumbling.

“Alright, kid, let’s see you fight this.” Kisame unraveled the bandages around Samehada, revealing that it was not made of metal but a series of downward facing dark blue/purple scales until its hilt. “This is Samehada; the most terrifying of all the Seven Swordsmen’s blades.”

Moving faster than Gai expected for an over seven foot tall monster, Kisame slammed the sword into Gai’s side. Konoha’s taijutsu master cried out in pain.

“Samehada’s a special sword. It doesn’t just slice, it shreds. And it also absorbs some of your
chakra.” Kisame swung again, throwing Gai into the air.

“Kuchiyose no Jutsu!” He shouted. Kisame paused.

“A turtle! You summoned a turtle.” The Akatsuki doubled over in laughter. “My sharks will devour your turtle friend.”

A large red tortoise, with a red shell with a yellow underside and yellow swirls and an orange bandana around his right front leg, appeared beneath Gai.

“Ningame is a tortoise, not a turtle,” corrected Gai.

“Why have you summoned me mid-air?”

Gai jumped off Ningame’s back, performing a drop kick on Kisame. The blue skinned man blocked with Samehada and tossed Gai away, turning his attention on Lee, who was now fighting imaginary enemies.

For a man his size, Kisame possessed immense speed and more than enough strength to send an opponent flying across the battlefield. And that’s exactly what he did to Lee.

-ANBU-

Sakura jerked at Gai-sensei’s anguished scream, nearly getting herself impaled on lance arm of a White Zetsu. She watched Kisame slam the broadside of the thing he called a sword into her friend’s back. There was an ominous snapping sound, similar to when one of the Tsuchikage’s bones popped out of place. Lee flipped over a couple times in the air and crashed solidly to the ground.

She shunshined to his sides, hands already glowing the green of her mystical palm technique. Sakura could immediately see that the skin on his back had been ripped to shreds. It was nonexistent in some parts, and she could see the bones in his spine. One of Kisame’s many sharks had taken a good chunk out of his left calf.

“Hold on, Lee. You’re not going to die. I’ll let you take me on a date when we get back. Itachi won’t mind.”

“You’re beautiful, Sakura-chan.” Lee hacked and coughed. Blood poured from his mouth, soaking into his flashy green spandex jumpsuit.

“You’re not allowed to die, Lee. No one dies on my watch unless I kill them. You hear me?” Her tears mixed with the blood on his face. “LEE!” She made the hand seal to release her Yin Seal. Her Reverse Creation Rebirth would save him. It had to.

“Stop, Sakura.” Gai’s voice was hollow.

“Gai-sensei, I can heal him.”

He shook his head gently. “Look at him, Sakura. It’s too late. Lee is already dead.”

Tears blurred her vision. But what her eyes refused to see her jutsu confirmed. His heart had stopped. Lee was gone.

Sakura watched through watery eyes as Gai-sensei released the Sixth Chakra Gate, using his enhanced abilities to use his Morning Peacock technique. He started by kicking Kisame into the air and then rained and endless barrage of punches up him. His fists were moving so fast they
were set ablaze. Kisame crashed into the desert sand.

Sakura remembered when Lee had opened the gates during the chuunin exams. Kakashi-sensei had thought Gai-sensei insane for teaching such a dangerous technique to a gennin. She remembered how Lee said he was sworn to only open them in a life or death situation or when protecting someone dear.

Using them to avenge Lee’s death was rather fitting.

Unbelievably, Kisame stood.

Gai-sensei’s aura increased exponentially as he opened the Seventh Gate. His skin took on a purple tint, his eyes glowed red. Gai had explained once that the green aura surrounding him was not chakra, but sweat evaporating instantaneously from his own body energy.

He placed his right hand in front of his face, palm facing away. With his left hand he formed a fist and tapped the back of his right hand. Using his right hand, Gai formed half of the tiger seal, and the air pressure that built up took the shape of a gigantic tiger. The pressure condensed, and with a roar of “Daytime Tiger!” was released on Gai’s command.

It caused a massive concussive explosion, which threw White Zetsus and allies alike. It should have been a one-hit kill, but Kisame survived. Gai moved at the speed of light, rendering Kisame unconscious with a hand chop to the back of his neck.

Gai-sensei collapsed like a pile of falling rocks.

-ANBU-

The battle had finished quickly after Gai’s amazing display. There actually hadn’t been many White Zetsus to deal with after his Daytime Tiger attack.

Sakura had commandeered the assistance of a Suna shinobi to run Gai back to the medic base. As soon as he was moved from the makeshift gurney to an operating bed she was repairing the damage caused by opening the Seventh Chakra Gate. She had to knit together every muscle in his body, seeing as the muscle fibers had ripped to shreds.

Kakashi had brought Lee’s body to the medic base as well. It was currently lying in the morgue. He wanted Gai to make the decision of what to do with him. Teachers weren’t supposed to pick favorites, but everyone in Konoha knew that Gai had adored the boy. Gai had made every effort to prove that lacking a talent for ninjutsu and genjutsu did not mean that Lee could not be a shinobi. The duo trained from the early hours of the morning before the sun rose over the Hokage Mountain to well past the time his other two students had stopped for the day. He had passed down a philosophy of perseverance, hard work, and never giving up. Gai and Lee had been much closer than student and sensei. The bond was more like that of father and son.

Sakura finished with Gai. She stepped outside the tent to inform Neji and Tenten of his condition and allowed them into to see their sensei. She gave them her condolences for Lee’s death, expressing her sorrow that she couldn’t save him. Tenten snapped at her to leave, screaming that it was her fault that Lee was dead.

“Don’t listen to her, Sakura.”

“But it is my fault, Kakashi-sensei. If I hadn’t wasted time trying to heal him with the Mystical Palm. If I had just used my Reverse technique from the start he might have lived.”

“It’s not your fault, Sakura. You’re a marvelous medical ninja. Your prowess is comparable to
Tsunade-sama’s, but there are some injuries you just can’t heal.” Kakashi consoled her. “Maybe you could have saved Lee. It’s also possible that even your jutsu couldn’t save him. You’ve saved many lives, Sakura, but you’re not expected to save them all.”

“What’s the point if I can’t even save those close to me?”

“Death is a part of life. It’s times like these where I wished I could follow Gai’s philosophy. Look towards the future and don’t dwell in the past. Remember Lee fondly. Don’t ever tell Gai that I quoted him.” He mockingly demanded, causing Sakura to hiccup and giggle at the same time.

-ANBU-

Tuesday, July 2

Thanks to Gai, Kisame was subdued and safely ensconced in the Alliance’s prisoner of war area of the camp. Tsunade had ordered Ibiki to do whatever necessary to break Kisame and get him to reveal the location of Akatsuki’s base.

Kisame had incredibly high pain thresholds. He held out for two weeks before Ibiki cracked and sent for Aoba Yamashiro. The Konoha shinobi delved into an unconscious Kisame’s mind. His jutsu was interrupted when the prisoner bit his own tongue, forcing himself to regain consciousness. Shizune had been summoned, and the process was repeated with Kisame pumped with enough drugs to kill a whale and Shizune using medical ninjutsu to reinforce his sedated state.

Gaara had the two remaining search parties recalled. Using Kisame’s knowledge, he constructed a team to rescue Yamato. The wood user had been handed over to Madara to hasten the production of his White Zetsu army as well as to strengthen them with the cells of the First Hokage that Yamato had. If they rescued Yamato from the Mountains’ Graveyard, Madara’s ability to grow and enhance his army would be cut off.

It explained many of the unanswered questions Sakura and Shizune had regarding the White Zetsu’s physiology. Having been strengthened by Yamato, their DNA was very similar to Hashirama Senju’s DNA. The First Hokage’s DNA accounted for the clones unique ability to morph limbs into weapons.

The Yamato Retrieval team had to wait until the next morning to deploy. They were waiting on Hana’s and Shikuro Aburame’s return. A team of Itachi, Hana, Shikuro, and Sakura travelled across both the Land of Frost and the Land of Sound to reach the land where the Mountains’ Graveyard was located.

Shikuro didn’t host the typical kikaichū of the Aburame clan. Instead he housed a rare nano-sized venomous species that would destroy and opponent’s cell with poison. It came in handy when facing White Zetsu clones that hindered their mission.

He could also send his insects out to scout a distance ahead of the party. The insects of the Aburame clan specialized in stealth. They silently flitted through the forest, mapping a path of the least resistance for them to follow.

The Mountains’ Graveyard was a mountainous region located in the north most region of the land between Takigakure to the east and Otogakure to the west. The forest was dense. If not for Shikuro’s insects guiding them through, Sakura was certain they would have been eaten by whatever monstrous creatures inhabited this wild land.

The forest was littered with the bones of creatures taller than the trees. Several sections of the
forest grew around the bones, hinting that the forest was several hundred years old.

According to the information they had gotten from Kisame, Akatsuki’s base was actually beneath the Mountains’ Graveyard. Kisame didn’t actually know anything about Yamato. Not why he was there, or where he was, but he did know the White Zetsu clones were grown on the deepest level.

All that said; this was a really simple mission. Her team knew all the variables and Kisame swore that Madara would not be present at the time. It was get in, grab Yamato, and get out.

It was Hana’s turn to shine once they were inside the base. Her Three Haimaru Brothers, her triplet canine companions, tracked Yamato’s scent using a scrap of blue cloth from his jounin uniform. The ninken led them towards the center.

In the underground base’s center was the strangest sight Sakura had ever seen. A giant cavernous pit from which the largest purple lotus flower from anywhere grew. The petals had to have a radius of at least twenty feet.

But what really caught the group’s attention was the wooden behemoth statue perched crossed legged in the flower’s center. If it was alive, Sakura would have thought it was meditating. The whole situation defied the law of physics. The statue sat up a flower grown with steroids and was held up by a single stem the size of maybe three people?

The Three Haimaru brothers stood at the edge of the chasm. According to their noses, Yamato was down below. Sakura spared a look at Itachi, who nodded, said a mental prayer, and jumped. The whoosh of air behind her told her that her other six companions had also thrown themselves over the ledge.

Sakura landed without an audible thump. Hana’s companions raced around the stem, which was much larger than she estimated from up above. There were also several large spikes at the stem’s base.

“Whoa, check this out.”

Sakura stared perplexed at the man who was at one point her replacement for Team 7. He was suspended within the stem, trapped up to his shoulders. Opposite him was a wooden clone easily recognizable to Konoha shinobi.

It wore the face of their first Hokage.

“This is a problem. Why? Because none of us can utilize Wood Release.”

Did all Aburames talk in that manner? Sakura turned to Itachi, because he always had answers. “How do you propose we get him out of this weed? He’s our only wood style user.”

“It may be possible for you to release him, Sakura.” He answered.

“Me?”

“I didn’t know you could use wood release, Sakura. Kiba never mentioned it.”

‘Kiba talks to his sister about me?’ was her first thought. “Wood release is a kekkei genkai, isn’t. I’m not a Senju.”

“It is a nature kekkei genkai, formed through simultaneous use of earth and water natured chakra. Anyone with both earth and water nature could theoretically use wood release jutsus.” Itachi explained.
“No way. I know where you’re going with this. Wood Release techniques are notoriously difficult to control. Shinobi that have failed turn into trees.”

“I think just this one use should be fine.” Itachi smiled. “All you need to do is will the flower to release Yamato.”

“But,” Sakura started.

“Besides, Yamato can use it, and he’s not a Senju. You’ll be fine, Sakura.”

“Don’t expect fast results.”

-ANBU-

Sakura worked reasonably well under pressure. She had to learn to under Tsunade. That woman hated to waste time and demanded that she learn the technique of the week within a week. If Yamato wasn’t unconscious, she would have asked him for tips.

It took her a little over an hour to manage to manipulate both earth and water chakra at the same time. She almost lost her concentration when a skinny beam of wood shot out of her wrist. She started by pulling on each chakra nature separately so she could get a feel of them. Then she drew them one at a time and mixed them so she had a vague sense of what wood nature chakra felt like.

After consecutive successful attempts that yielded a wooden beam, Sakura placed her palms on the stem on either side of Yamato. She carefully drew upon both her water nature chakra and her earth nature chakra, and directed the resulting wood nature chakra into the lotus flower’s stem. Not knowing what jutsu held him in place, Sakura settled to willing the plant to push Yamato out by sending it the message that he was a foreign entity that didn’t belong.

The plant clearly understood her message because it rejected Yamato immediately.

Sakura groaned as she pushed Yamato off her, accepting Shikuro’s extended hand. Itachi shouldered the wood user, nodding his head in Shikuro’s direction to indicate he should lead them out.

-ANBU-

Friday, July 5

The retrieval party was greeted with good news and bad news upon their return to camp.

Yamato was perfectly fine, according to Shizune’s examination, simply trapped in a Sharingan based genjutsu that rendered him unconscious. The genjutsu was easily reversed and Yamato was estimated to awaken in two to three days once he had gotten his fill of natural rest.

Yamato’s recovery was the good news.

The bad news was Kisame had escaped.

The significance of the White Zetsu clone’s hollow body was answer. They could unzip themselves and extend their body to trap a ninja within and siphon off his chakra. They could then use that chakra to transform into the ninja it came from. It was a much more complex transformation than a simple Henge. With this method, White Zetsus could copy and use kekkei genkais. Henge only gave the appearance of a kekkei genkai.

With that knowledge, Tsunade decided to summon Naruto from his training. With his new Nine-
Tails Chakra mode, Naruto gained the ability to sense negative feelings. It was an ability unique to the Nine-Tails, so Killer B would not be able to recognize the White Zetsu clones in disguise. Madara’s army had already accounted for the deaths of 25,000 Allied shinobi. They absolutely could not afford to lose more to sneak attacks in the night, nor the hysteria that would result.

The Raikage had argued with her furiously over the summons. This was supposed to be a war to protect the Jinchuuriki. They were not supposed to be throwing Naruto on the front lines like a common shinobi.

Tsunade put her faith in Naruto. The boy had matured over the years. Naruto would not go gallivanting off in search of Madara and try to end the war singlehandedly. He had an ability that could be used, an ability that necessitated his return. Tsunade would not win this war if she didn’t use her shinobi effectively because of the need to keep them hidden.

She had not agreed with the decision to send Naruto and Killer B into hiding in the first place. Given the circumstances and Danzou’s designs on him, Itachi’s action had been the best one. She didn’t call Naruto back when she first awoke because the other Kages disagreed with her.

Now the Hokage didn’t care for their opinions. Naruto was her shinobi. He had an unexplainable ability to make friends of everyone he met. His return would boost the army’s morale, for they would get to meet the person their fighting so hard for and dying to defend, and Naruto would be able to unite them further and spur them to fight.

Sakura agreed with her shishou’s plan one hundred percent. The war was wearing her thin, as well as the rest of the alliance. Naruto’s sunniness never failed to make her feel better and he would be able to boost the shinobis’ morale.

-ANBU-

Orochimaru waited anxiously for the immortality serum he received from Danzou to take effect.

The fool had traded the secret to eternal life for a jutsu to recall souls from beyond the grave. His snake like tongue traced over his upper lip. He had most certainly gotten the better end of the deal. The Summoning: Impure World Reincarnation technique was still flawed, imperfect. It wasn’t invincible.

He had true immortality in his grasp.

The Snake Sannin tested the serum on Kabuto first. If there were no serious side effects, he would never need to switch bodies again.

Kabuto’s body convulsed. His skin turned ashen. He began to froth at the mouth. His veins become more pronounced.

“Help me,” the bespectacled man gargled at his master.

Orochimaru hissed. Danzou had tried to trick him. He would see the old fool dead for this stunt.

“Kukuku,” he chuckled. Killing Danzou would be easily accomplished. Orochimaru had originally planned to sit on the sidelines of this war. He was not going to get involved. He was not interested in a war started by others, but that did not mean he wouldn’t use it to his advantage. Depending on the outcome of the war, the sannin would annihilate a victorious but war weary Konoha, or Konoha would be crushed by Madara and he would kill Danzou and be Hokage.

Danzou thought he could play Orochimaru for a fool. Orochimaru would show him just how wrong he was to trust a snake in the grass.
Saturday, July 6

Sakura supposed she really ought to say something to Tsunade-shishou about Gai’s behavior. Or at least recommend he get a psyche evaluation done. His reckless endangerment of his own body was going to land him in one of the medical tents permanently. She knew it was his coping mechanism, his way of grieving, but pushing his body to the max trying to kill every White Zetsu clone he encountered wasn’t healthy.

Then again, it really wasn’t her place to say. When her biological parents had died she impersonated a zombie for a month. At least Gai-sensei was expressing his grief, if in a self-destructive manner.

His killing of everything white with extreme prejudice allowed her focus her attention on emergency healing, occasionally punching the lone clone that slipped past Itachi or Kakashi. Both males insisted that, whether she was fighting or healing, she did so near them.

In Kakashi’s case, it was because he was just as likely as Gai to overdo himself. Itachi wanted her nearby so he could defend her. It was sweet, in a chauvinistic way, insinuating that she needed his protection.

It was at that moment that her third protector dropped out of the sky. Sixteen of him. Naruto, cloaked from head to toe in yellow and orange chakra that flamed around the outline of his body, smashed a foot into a White Zetsu’s cloaked like a Kumo nin’s chest.

The visage of a Kumo shinobi dropped and a tree sprouted out of the dead clone’s chest.

“Isn’t this sweet, Sakura-chan? I can make trees grow.”

Sakura watched somewhat mesmerized as Naruto’s flame cloaked shadow clones quickly dealt with the White Zetsu army the Third Division was fighting. Sure enough, with every touch of the Kyuubi’s chakra, trees formed in dead Zetsu clones. And Naruto was making quick work of the clones. One punch from him and they were dead, when she needed at least three most times. It must have been the Bijuu’s chakra that made it easier for him to kill.

All around the blonde Jinchuuriki shinobi cheered jubilantly. The Konoha shinobi were particularly vocal with their catcalling.

Naruto Uzumaki was a one man army. With his dozens of shadow clones, he had completely obliterated the White Zetsus each division faced. By the time he raced into camp with his scream of “BAA-CHAN!” the entire army knew of his feat and caused a din cheering his name.

The only way he could have possibly been more destructive was if he was a puppet master. Sakura shuddered and promptly made a mental note to keep all scrolls pertaining to learning the art of puppetry well out of the blonde’s reach. She could already imagine and army of clones wielded a hundred puppets each, like Sasori. Naruto definitely had the chakra to do it.

Of course, he would cloak them in orange cloaks that could be seen from Suna and he would have no need for stealth. There would be no force in the world strong enough to beat a puppeteer Naruto.

Tsunade-shishou informed Naruto of the White Zetsu’s shape shifting powers. She charged him
with discretely sensing the feelings of the whole army, laying major emphasis on the word
discrete.

“Leave it to me, Baa-chan. Plant face won’t know what hit him.”

“I don’t want you to handle it, brat. I won’t you to learn which of my shinobi are the enemies and
report their names back to me.”

Naruto rubbed the back of his head. “I’m not too good with names.”

“Then take Shikamaru with you.” She dismissed both teens.

“Is that wise, Tsunade-shishou? Naruto’s likely to start turning them into trees so that he doesn’t
have to remember a list of names.”

“The Nara boy will keep him in line. Now I want to talk about your faulty seal.”

Sakura huffed. It wasn’t faulty, per say, just unfinished.

The busty Hokage grasped her apprentice’s left arm, tearing off the long sleeve of Konoha’s
standard issued jounin uniform. She studied it silently for a few minutes and scanned it with
chakra. “You said you tried creating a second Yin Seal?”

Sakura nodded. Tsunade released her arm. “Well, the seal’s not malfunctioning at all.”

“Then why can’t I use it?”

“You didn’t actually make a second Yin Seal. It formed a Yang Seal instead.”

“A Yang Seal?” the pink haired girl echoed.

“This goes back to the basics of chakra and using jutsu. When you call upon chakra for a jutsu,
you have to balance the amount of spiritual energy and physical energy you use. Chakra on its
own is the perfect blend of the two chakra types, but different jutsus have different requirements as
far as how much spiritual energy versus physical energy. The two must always be balanced. So, if
you use more physical energy for an earth style jutsu, you use proportionally less spiritual energy
for that jutsu. Because you already have a Yin Seal, to remain balanced, the second seal became a
Yang Seal.” Tsunade lectured.

“Why wasn’t the first seal a Yang Seal? Does it always make a Yin Seal first?” Sakura
questioned.

The blonde laughed. “No. Yin is associated with spiritual energy. When you meditate, you’re
dealing with the spiritual energy, concentrating and focusing it to serve a purpose. In the case of
the Yin Seal, you’re manipulating spiritual energy to store it in an area that is not your chakra
coils. That’s why, despite feeling soothing and calming, meditating is tiresome and requires you
rest afterwards even though you felt like you were just sleeping.

“Accordingly, Yang is based on the physical energy. And natural energy is inherently physical,
seeing as it comes from nature itself. The natural energy couldn’t be stored in a Yin Seal because it
is not spiritual.”

“That’s really interesting. And a little disappointing.” Sakura rushed on at her shishou’s raised
eyebrow. “It’s just now I have to release two seals separately. Had it been a second Yin Seal, with
one release I could use both my stored chakra and natural energy.”
“Yes, that would have been convenient. I’m going to have Gaara pull you from active duty with both the Third Division and the medical base when Naruto’s identified all the infiltrators. Then you can practice entering Sage Mode and using natural chakra.”

-ANBU-

**Tuesday, July 9**

Sakura never thought she’d see the day that she had to learn from Naruto.

The blonde Jinchuuriki had needed very little time to pick out all the shinobi that wore false appearances. Gaara had issued them fake orders to break down a specific section of camp. With them all gathered in one place, it was easy for Naruto to deal with them. In the time it took for ramen water to boil, he had created a new grove.

The pair had retreated to the desert. The war was currently focused in the eastern region of the Land of Frost, which bordered the Land of Lightning, so they would be safe with just the two of them and there would be no interference.

Naruto was surprisingly good at explaining how to mix the three energies to form natural chakra and he was better at teaching her how to wield it. That wasn’t surprising at all. His theoretical understanding was always terrible. He was much better with the physical aspects of training.

“You did it, Sakura-chan! Whoa, you’re eyes are freaky.”

“What?” the pinkette panicked. “I haven’t grown eye stalks have I?”

“No, no, no, not at all. Not anything like that. They just look really different.”

Naruto’s assurance didn’t make her feel better. Different wasn’t necessarily good. Just saying they looked different was vague. The eyes were the only feature that was supposed to change when you entered perfect Sage Mode. They took on the characteristics of your contracted animal. Slugs had eyespots position on the end of an eye stalk that could sense the amount of light and were retractable, not eyes in a human or even a cat or dog sense.

“Transform!” Naruto shouted.

“Naruto, what are you doing?”

“Now you can see them for yourself, Sakura-chan.”

The cloud of smoke quickly vanished and Sakura leaned in to peer at ‘her’ eyes. They were completely black. It was like how the pupils dilated, growing larger in the dark to let in as much light as possible and the eye appeared to be more pupil than iris. Except that Sakura no longer had an iris. There was no green to be found in her eyes, just black.

Similar to the orange above Naruto’s eyes, Sakura had green. It was the emerald green color of her eyes. It was a darker shade. It was almost odd to look at. Surreal. If not for her bright pink locks, Sakura didn’t think she’d recognize herself.

“Let’s spar, Sakura-chan.” Naruto dropped the Henge.

“I don’t know. We should be getting back.”

“No way. Baa-chan said to make sure that you could enter AND use Sage Mode. C’mon. A quick fight just to make sure that you can actually use natural chakra. Besides, I never did get to fight
Naruto grinned good-naturedly.

Sakura grinned too. He had insisted they fight after he learned how much she had grown while he was gone, but with the Akatsuki, her being in charge of a team of genin at the time, and his preparations for the chuunin exams, they had never gotten around to that spar.

“Alright.” She pulled a red scroll from her flak jacket and unfurled it, unsealing her giant axe. She spun it around with one hand before grasping the shaft firmly.

“What’s that for Sakura-chan? You’re supposed to use senjutsu!” Naruto yelped.

Sakura answered by swinging the weapon in a wide arc at his midsection. “I am. Sage Mode increases taijutsu skills too.” She smirked as he paled. Her punches, already strong enough to crack mountains, would now be able to completely destroy them.

“Fine. I won’t hold back either. Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!”

“That’s completely unfair, Naruto. One versus one hundred?”

The foremost Naruto, the original, laughed. The distinctive screeching of air was heard as Naruto used his second signature jutsu; Rasenshuriken. The blades of the shuriken whirred when he threw it. Sakura dropped, arching her back backwards and placing her palms on the sand, forming a bridge with her body. She followed through, pushing off her hands and standing on her feet.

“What the hell was that?”

“My own original jutsu. Well, it’s actually based off my dad’s Rasengan, but the Rasengan wasn’t complete. My jutsu is. I call it the Rasenshuriken.”

“I don’t care what it’s called. How did you throw it? Jutsus can’t be thrown?” Sakura had never heard of such a thing. You made hand seals and used chakra and the elements would respond. The earth would shake, wind would cut down trees, water would take shapes, lightning would strike, you would breathe fire. But they all required contact with the element.

Naruto shrugged. “It’s made of thousands of miniscule wind blades that I shape to a fuma shuriken. By using Sage Chakra to shape it, it becomes more stable.”

“You can throw it because it’s more stable?” She repeated. “Are you saying that every other jutsu in the world is incomplete and unstable?”

“Hey! I know that face.” Sakura’s eyes seemed to be sparkling. It was unnerving for Naruto because they were black. “Less misty eyes and more fighting.”

“Right. Suiton: Suiryūdan no Jutsu!”

“Sakura-chan, we’re in a desert. There’s no water for that jutsu.” A giant, powerful dragon formed behind Sakura. The glowing red eyes made it look especially fierce and formidable. With one lunge it wiped out a quarter of Naruto’s clones.

“Wind Release: Air Bullets!” The Narutos peppered her water dragon with bullets of air. Wherever they hit they created a hole, until her dragon resembled a piece of Swiss cheese and fell apart. The water splashed down, mixing with the sand, making the ground beneath her firmer.

While his clones dealt with her pet, Naruto charged Sakura. She sidestepped his punch, his fist slide past her face. She drew back her own fist, prepared to punch him clear across the desert with enough damage that he wouldn’t be able to get up even with the Kyuubi’s help. She was sent
Sakura stood, ignoring the scrapes from the sand but raising a green hand to her right cheek, glaring at her blonde teammate. She had dodged that punch.

“It’s Frog Kata. The natural energy around me extends the reach of my attacks.”

“You shouldn’t have told me that, Naruto.” Sakura grinned, feral. “Now I don’t even have to hit you with my monstrous strength.” He gulped.

Sakura ran towards him. She needed to keep this battle to a close range fight. Right now, her taijutsu was her best weapon. Sand was not really conducive for earth style jutsus, and the desert had little moisture in the air. If she could force Naruto on the defensive, she could keep him from using ninjutsu against her. His were lethal.

In the end, Naruto won their mock spar. Despite her best efforts to maintain close contact, he was much more adept at Sage techniques. It was all too easy for him to make a Rasengan and force her to disengage. Once he had the distance, he controlled the battle.

Naruto and Sakura remained in the desert so he could teach her everything he knew about Sage Art techniques. Unfortunately, there was actually very little he could share. The majority were based on the frogs, so Sakura would have to return to Saisei no Haru to learn them from the slugs.

**Monday, July 15**

Gaara stood, arms crossed, staring impassively at sea of white before him.

Madara was getting impatient for a victory. The last of his White Zetsu army, which amassed to 30,000, more than twice as many compared to his division, coalesced at one end of the valley.

The cork plug popped out of his gourd. Gaara caught it as his sand poured out, shifting and twisting around him, ready to defend against any attack.

One of the White Zetsu clones laughed harshly. “We’ve got you at a bit of a disadvantage, don’t we, Ichibi? Caught you outside your precious desert, Kazekage.”

“I do not need to be in a desert to use sand.”

“Perhaps. But the sandbox you carry with you is not enough.”

“As long as I have sand, I can do anything.”

To prove his point, a wall of pure sand, over one hundred feet tall, arced over Gaara’s head. The sand swept through the clones, until they were all covered. Then he crouched, slamming both hands down onto the sand.

“Giant Sand Burial.” His sand compressed, crushing everything buried beneath.

Gaara calmly stood, turning to face his awed division.

“That’s a hell of a jutsu.” His proxy commander complimented flatly. “Where did all that sand come from?”

Shikamaru watched as small trails of sand shot out of the ground and back into the gourd on the
Kazekage’s back. “I see. You used your personal sand to grind the rocks and minerals below, generating more sand for you to use. Impressive.”

-ANBU-

The five Kages sat once more around the round war council table.

This time in a more euphoric mood than the previous meetings.

“Excellent.” Tsunade said as Gaara finished his division’s report. The other Kages were pleased as well. Madara’s army had been completely destroyed. “But we cannot become complacent. The clones may have been dealt with, but the Akatsuki is still dangerous.”

Ōnoki spoke. “The Hokage is right. There is still Kisame and the original White Zetsu to deal with.”

“And Madara Uchiha himself,” growled A.

“There is also the matter of Danzou.” Tsunade said, worried. “It is concerning. He reanimated the souls of my predecessors, betraying the Alliance, but not once have they been sent to fight.”

“Hokage-sama, it may be that he was waiting for such a situation like this. The previous Hokages will act as both a line of defense and an unmatchable offensive weapon. Our Hokages’ achievements are legendary. Danzou’s perversion will demoralize Konoha shinobi. How can they be expected to fight against the very people that created the village, that they swore loyalty to, vowed to protect, and respected above all others?” Shikaku advised.

“I would not expect them to fight. My grandfather was a shinobi like no other. The “God of Shinobi.” I don’t think that anyone could defeat him.”

“What will we do if Danzou attacks?” asked Mei.

“We would have to end the jutsu.”

“Do you know how to do that?”

“No.”

-ANBU-

**Tuesday, July 16**

“Madara wants the Uzumaki brat alive. Catch him first. Then I want you to kill Tsunade.” Danzou ordered.

The four Hokages vanished.

Danzou leaned on his cane. The war was not going at all according to plan. To start, he never thought Sai would have betrayed him like he had, somehow sparing Tsunade. Nor was he happy that her apprentice was not locked up in Blood Prison. He had only ever planned to use her to start the war, but with her out of the way there was a less of a chance of the Akatsuki members being defeated.

But, in the large picture, the girl was inconsequential. What really made the difference was the Uzumaki brat. He had not joined the war effort until well after Danzou had revealed his true side, but he had killed many of their army and further prevented Madara from sending White Zetsu
clones to infiltrate their camp.

With the last of the clones dead, they had to do something. So, the Hokages and been removed from their coffins. The Allied Shinobi Forces could not hope to defeat them. Not one of the Kages held even a tenth of a talent the previous Hokages had.

He waited over an hour for one of the Kages to return.

“Glurg.” Danzou choked on his own blood as a sword slid through his heart.

Orochimaru’s neck extended from behind until his pale face was directly in front of Danzou’s. “You didn’t think you could fool me, did you? I would never be so foolhardy as to try and untested serum, you must know that. For a ninja, you’re terrible at assassinating, so I thought I would show you how it’s done, properly.”

The Sannin removed the blade torturously slowly, causing Danzou more pain than was necessary, but it brought him immeasurable pleasure to watch him suffer. And he did. His sword of Kusanagi was laced with poison. Danzou’s last moments were very painful.

It was fitting that he died in the shadows from whence he operated.

-ANBU-

“Um, Sakura-chan, don’t look now, but we have company.”

Sakura snapped her eyes open, breaking off her concentration of natural chakra. What was Naruto playing at? They were isolated in a desert and nobody but Tsunade-shishou and the Kazekage knew they were there. Besides, who the hell could sneak up upon two people in Sage Mode? Seriously, this whole getting sneak up on gig was getting old fast.

She rose and turned to ream out whoever thought they could disturb their training, only to have her breath hitch.

The first four Hokages, who were long dead, stood in a line in front of her and Naruto.

Hashirama Senju, the First Hokage, was a tall man with tanned skin and waist-length black hair, and the traditional Konoha headband across his forehead. He wore red metal plates, emblazoned with the Senju clan symbol, protecting his torso, shoulders, thighs, and forearms, over simple black suit.

The Second Hokage, Tobirama, wore the exact same armor; it’s only difference being that it was blue and he guarded his upper arms instead of the forearm. It also had a collar of thick white fur. Similar to his brother, Tobirama was a tall man. He was fair skinned with white, shaggy hair, and three red markings on his face — one under each of his eyes, and one on his chin. He wore a happuri, covering his forehead and cheeks.

Next to him was Hiruzen Sarutobi. The Third Hokage looked the same as the last time Sakura had seen him. He was light skinned, and the shortest of the four Hokages. His face was lined with age and his hair still grey. He wore a simple black jumpsuit, with mesh on top of the lower limbs, and a grey gauntlet covering his right wrist, forearm, and elbow. His head was covered with an armored hood, and a Konoha bandana layered over it.

The Fourth Hokage stood at the end of the line. Taller than the Third but not the First and Second, Minato Namikaze was a fairly tall, fair skinned man, with spiky, blonde hair. He had jaw length bangs framing the sides of his face. His armor was the simplest, the standard Konoha uniform with a green flak jacket and two bands each on both his sleeves. The Yondaime was the only one
wearing the Hokage’s cloak, decorated with a flame motif on the bottom edges. Sakura knew she would see the kanji for Fourth Hokage written vertically down the back if he turned around. Looking at him now, she didn’t need Naruto to confirm her suspicions that he was his father. Naruto was a clone of Minato, and Sakura imagined when he was alive he had the same bright blue eyes.

All four of the Kages’ eyes were an eerie white shade, nothing like the Hyuuga’s Byakugan.

“Naruto.”

“Hey, dad.”

“Your son is the Nine-Tails Jinchuuriki?” Tobirama asked Minato. He nodded. “I do not wish to harm your son.”

“I know. Naruto, we have no control over our actions.”

“Don’t worry about it, dad.” Naruto grinned. “Sakura-chan and I can handle the four of you.”

The First Hokage threw back his head and laughed, while Minato and Hiruzen chuckled. Sakura slapped him in the back of the head. “Naruto, you idiot. We can’t face four Hokages.”

“Of course we can, Sakura-chan. We just need to keep them distracted until Baa-chan comes.”

She blinked. “Tsunade-shishou’s coming?”

“She will be. Kuchiyose no Jutsu!” Naruto bit his thumb and slammed a hand to the ground. The black lines spread from his palm and an orange and purple frog as tall as Naruto appeared. “Gamakichi, I need you to fetch Baa-chan.”

“You got it, boss.” The toad replied and he was gone in a second cloud of smoke.

“Did you say Tsunade, girl? My granddaughter?”

“Um, yeah, Hokage-sama.” Sakura hesitated addressing Hashirama. “She’s currently the Fifth Hokage.”

The Third Hokage spoke for the first time. “I am sorry it has come to this, children.” He lamented. “I wanted a peaceful future for you.”

“Don’t worry about it old man. If there’s such a thing as peace, I will find it. I won’t give up! When I’m Hokage, I’ll end this cycle of hatred.”

Sakura turned admiring eyes on Naruto. She found it unbelievable how much he had grown. Once he was an obnoxious, loud, knucklehead who couldn’t even channel chakra efficiently. But now, now Naruto was far above her in ability. He still had the same straight forward, brash personality, but skill wise he had jumped leaps and bounds.

The pinkette tensed as she sensed the incoming chakra signature of her shishou and Kakashi. Would they be enough to defeat the Hokages? Wouldn’t it be better if they outnumbered them, instead of matching them four for four? Why had only those two come?

“I should have gotten you myself, Baa-chan. Gamakichi must be getting slow.”

“Don’t call me that, brat.”

“Sorry, Jiji, I’ve always wanted to fight you, but this is the only time I’ll get to fight my dad, so I
“Sorry, Jiji, I’ve always wanted to fight you, but this is the only time I’ll get to fight my dad, so I let Kakashi-sensei have you.” In the blink of an eye Naruto was cloaked in orange chakra. He disappeared to a distant part of the desert, followed by a yellow flash as Minato went after him.

“Shall we, sir?” Hiruzen and Kakashi shunshined in the opposite direction of father and son, leaving Sakura with the remaining three Hokages.

“This is an interesting family reunion. Sakura, are you ready?” Tsunade snapped at the pink haired girl.

“Ready?” she stammered. “Shishou, I can’t fight a Kage. I don’t stand a chance.”

“Then dodge girl. You’re a medic-nin, I taught you that. A medic-nin is always the last to fall in battle because they don’t allow themselves to be injured.” The Fifth Hokage aimed a fist at the ground. The two brothers leapt backwards as the sand scattered and clouded their vision.

Sakura raised an arm to protect her eyes. When she lowered her arm Tobirama was in front of her, sword raised, and thrust the hilt into her stomach. She doubled over and rolled left, climbing back to her feet and running. The chances of her beating the Second Hokage didn’t even exist.

‘He’s fast,’ she thought as he once again appeared in front of her. ‘But not as fast as the Fourth Hokage.’ He was named the Yellow Flash for a reason.

This time his sword sliced through her upper right arm, a deep wound that cut through the bicep.

‘I can’t evade him forever,’ Sakura thought as Tobirama prepared for a third pass. ‘How do I fight him?’

-ANBU-

Hiruzen Sarutobi and Kakashi Hatake stood silently.

“I never thought I would have to fight the saplings that I nurtured to grow into strong, sturdy trees.”

“Can you not speak plainly, Hokage-sama? This is the really good part where Junko admits her two fold betrayal to her leader with his brother. I don’t want to have to divide my attention, sir.”

The silver haired jounin asked.

“There’s a plot to those books?”

“Of course there’s a plot, Hokage-sama!” Kakashi was scandalized. Why did everyone believe the Icha Icha series was nothing but pure smut? Why did no one give it a chance? It truly was a literary masterpiece. Maybe after the war was over he could take over writing the stories? Jiraiya would want that, right?

Kakashi’s eye glazed as he imagined the next issue of Icha Icha: Icha Icha Subterfuge, with his name on the cover as the author. He let out a perverted little giggle. He was not so caught up in his fantasies that he failed to dodge the Third Hokage’s Fire Dragon Flame Bullet jutsu. The magnificent dragon launched a three pronged attack, at his front, left, and right.

The technique was designed to turn the enemy to ash in a matter of seconds. Luckily, he was already surrounded by sand and Kakashi had no problem burrowing underground to avoid the attack. Hiruzen moved out of the way when he emerged from beneath the Hokage, right hand engulfed in lightning chakra that chirped like a thousand birds.

“Slow down, sir. I haven’t said start yet.” Red blood spotted the back of the Hokage’s armor,
drawn from Kakashi’s self-inflicted kunai wound to his palm.

“As laid back as ever, Kakashi. You won’t even take a fight against your former Hokage seriously.” Hiruzen sighed. “I hate to have to do this. Earth Release: Great Mud River.” The sand under the jounin’s feet promptly transformed into mud, causing Kakashi to sink in up to his knees.

“Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!” Kakashi roared. A towering ball of flames blazed at Hiruzen, its heat so intense that the sand was turning to glittering glass. He pulled himself out of the mud pit and molded wind chakra, blowing it at his fireball to strengthen it.

“Kuchiyose no Jutsu: Enma!” The Monkey King transformed into his adamantine staff form.

‘So he’s bringing out the big guns. I guess I shall too.’ Kakashi created a shadow clone.

-ANBU-

“You’ve grown, Tsunade. I remember spoiling you as a child. Do you still gamble?’”

Tsunade did not have time waste on words. A chakra scalpel sliced through his right arm, removing everything below the shoulder. Hashirama, still laughing at memories of her as a young girl, had been unprepared.

His eyes darkened, to the color she remembered her grandfather having, then went back to the off-white color. His arm regenerated. “Wood Release: Cutting Technique.” A branch of wood sprouted out of his left shoulder, taking the shape of a sword. He broke it off with his right hand.

“I can’t believe you would attack your own grandfather.” Hashirama sulked.

The Fifth Hokage rolled her eyes. It seemed even dying couldn’t stop her grandfather from sulking like a two year old. She blinked. He shouldn’t be sulking. The jutsu reanimates the soul and is specifically designed to bring them back without emotions so they would essentially be corpses capable of fighting and using techniques that would kill other shinobi with no harm to them. Were the Hokages fighting Danzou’s control?

The First Hokage flew at her, intent on running her through with his wooden makeshift sword. Tsunade dodged his first swing and continued to move out of the way as he spun around for a second swing. She put her back to him and elbowed him with her chakra enhanced strength. Hashirama was thrown backwards. He flipped over neatly in mid-air, touched down lightly on his feet, and launched himself back at his granddaughter. With the hand not holding his sword, he formed a seal Tsunade had never seen. “Mokuton: Hotei no Jutsu!” Numerous giant wooden hands the size of Orochimaru’s summon Manda erupted from the desert floor, twisting, twining and coiling about each other as they grasped for her.

Tsunade spent the next several minutes avoiding the wooden hands and dodging the First Hokage, moving in such a way that the hands snarled and entangled themselves. For good measure she used Lightning Style: Earth Flash. Being partly made from earth nature chakra, which was weakest against lightning chakra, it served to slow the wooden hands down.

Hashirama came at her with the sword again. She vaulted over him, tapping him on the shoulder as she did, pouring chakra transformed into electricity into his body. He collapsed behind her.

“I’ve completely disrupted your nervous system. I know it won’t be too long until you able to move again, but in the mean time I can force you to reform.” Tsunade soared into the sky.

“Heavenly Foot of Pain!”
Her heel slammed down on a dome-like structure with a dragon’s face. She pushed off to regain her balance and skidded to a stop a couple feet away from it.

It split down the middle to reveal her standing grandfather. “That’s an amazing jutsu, granddaughter, but I do no need hand signs to use medical ninjutsu.” Tsunade cursed herself for forgetting that the First Hokage could heal himself without forming seals.

She aimed a punch at his chest which he blocked by transforming his sword into a wooden shield composed of three spiral circles. The blonde woman twisted, aiming a heel rocketing at his face. He ducked under her leg, placed his hands against her stomach, propelling beams of wood through her.

The branches extended, pushing Tsunade away from the First and retracted with a squelch when he called them back.

She expelled the blood pooling in her mouth, spitting it onto the sand. “Yin Seal: Release!” The dark purple mark spread from the diamond on her forehead, down her face, her chest, to her fingertips. Tsunade activate her Strength of a Hundred Technique. In seconds the holes left behind closed up.

Hashirama laughed delighted. “So you did inherit my skill with medical ninjutsu!”

“That’s not all I inherited.” Tsunade stood tall, facing her grandfather with pride. “I inherited your Will of Fire. And so has every Konoha shinobi.”

The First Hokage’s face softened. This time, his eyes changed black and stayed dark. “That’s wonderful. Exactly what I had hoped for.”

-ANBU-

“You’ve always been my hero. I’m going to beat you into the ground and take that hat from your head, dad. That way Baa-chan will have to make me the Rokudaime.”

“Such ambition, Naruto.” Minato’s blue eyes sparkled.

Father and son observed each other. Having similar styles, this battle would be long. They shared the same signature jutsu, the Rasengan, and due to the Hiraishin and Tailed Beast Mode respectively, there was no difference in speed. Both shared an affinity for wind style jutsus as well.

Naruto’s advantage lay in his many completed forms of his father’s original jutsu, his shadow clones, and Kurama’s chakra.

The Fourth Hokage was forced to make the first move. Orange and yellow clashed loudly as father and son started a taijutsu brawl. Minato quickly disengaged upon realizing using taijutsu against Naruto was fruitless. The younger blonde’s chakra cloak could form independent arms capable of molding chakra. Getting close to Naruto was a sure way to see this fight end.

Naruto took the opportunity to use his newest technique, the Tailed Beast Ball. Before Minato could react he had gathered the positive black chakra and negative white chakra and compressed it into a sphere. He released it.

The Yondaime brought up one of his special three pronged kunai between his hands. “You know that’s the technique I based the Rasengan on?” He used the Hiraishin no Jutsu to send Naruto’s ball of chakra to one of his kunais.
“That was so cool! Where did it go?”

“I left one of my kunais back at Akatsuki’s base. For a quick return if I should need it.” Minato grinned mischievously. “I can teleport to any object marked with this special seal, or deflect a chakra based attack because they are connected.”

“So we just blew up Madara’s base?”

“Exactly. Shame the bastard’s not there. He had it completely cleared out before he gave Danzou the orders to release us.”

“That is awesome. I should have learned seals from Ero-sennin when I had the chance.”

“They’re quite useful.” Minato bent his knees and pushed off towards his son, chakra spiraling in the palm of his hand to form the Rasengan. “Prepare yourself, Naruto.”

A chakra arm formed on Naruto’s right side. Screeching filled the air as Naruto formed a Rasenshuriken.

He could throw the jutsu pretty fast, and it sailed at his dad, covering the distance of thirty feet in a tenth of a second. Minato use his Flying Thunder God technique once more, just as Naruto anticipated. He had not been aiming to hit the Fourth with his attack.

As Naruto predicted, his father appeared directly behind him via the seal he had placed on the Jinchuuriki’s shoulder early in the battle. Naruto knew it was there, and he knew that that would be the seal Minato chose when he hurled a Rasenshuriken his way. He had understood his dad’s fighting style, a distraction combined with his Hiraishin and Rasengan combo.

So Minato, who had expected to catch his son from behind, found himself face to face with Naruto, who turned around as soon as he had thrown the Rasenshuriken, and received a Rasengan to his chest from a second chakra arm, which sent him spiraling away.

The Yellow Flash lay on the desert sand, a gaping hole in his chest that was not regenerating. Instead the damage was spreading, Minato’s body crumbling to dust and revealing the Root agent used to resurrect him.

“How come your body’s not knitting back together?” Naruto asked from above him.

“Emotions are hard to control.” Minato answered. “One of the flaws of Summoning: Impure World Reincarnation is emotional closure can release the souls of the reincarnated.”

“Emotional closure,” echoed Naruto. Cerulean met cerulean. “I am so proud of you, son. And your mother would be too. You were not raised and revered as the hero I wanted you to be, but you’ve grown into one. You’ve found the answer. You’ll bring about peace. I believe in you. I love you, Naruto.”

He paid no attention to the tears making tracks down his face as he watched the last of Minato Namikaze’s body crumble. His soul hovered momentarily over the crumbling body. “I’ve already met Kaa-san. I love you both, Tou-san.”

Minato smiled as his soul was finally released, a brilliant light green beam shooting into the sky.

-Anbu-

Hiruzen swung his transformed monkey staff. Two Kakashis swerved out of the way, dodging Enma’s arms that grew from the black staff. The original and clone stood on opposite sides of the
Third Hokage, who raised the staff in front of him, prepared to swing at it whichever version of Kakashi moved first.

Chidori roared to life, and both Kakashis condensed the chakra further to make the enhanced version, Raikiri; the Lightning Cutter. The original raised his right hand and the clone his left. A line of blue lightning chakra connected the two Raikiris. Moving with the incredible speed that was required for Chidori, Kakashi cut through the adamantine staff that was Enma, who was dispelled with a puff of smoke, and through the Sandaime as well.

While he was reforming, the silver haired man summoned his ninken. “Kuchiyose: Doton: Tsuiga no Jutsu.” His summoned pack tracked the scent of his blood, sinking their teeth into Hiruzen. Bull, the largest of the eight, bit into his shoulder, and Pakkun was hanging off a wrist.

“Kakashi, he tastes nasty. Why can’t you ever summon me to touch my pads? They’re soft, supple and pink.”

“Sorry, Pakkun.” Kakashi shrugged. “Just hold him still will ya?”

-SANBU-

Sakura winced as the Second Hokage’s sword sliced her skin once more. She was covered in lacerations. Her blood freely painted the desert sands red. All her chakra was devoted to maintaining Sage Mode, which was the only thing preventing her from being run through by his Raijin no Ken. She could not afford to waste chakra to close wounds she should have avoided getting.

Tobirama had not gone unscathed. Thanks to her increased speed and reflexes, she had managed on a couple occasions to catch his arm in a vice grip and either remove important limbs with a chakra scalpel or, having gained the ability to spit acid from the slugs, nailed him with the corrosive liquid.

But Sakura was truly no match for a Kage. She could already see that this fight would end with her defeat.

She barely avoided the devastating water jutsus that the Nidaime was famous for, twisting her torso a painful almost ninety degrees to dodge the sword. “Is there no way to end this infernal jutsu?”

To the pinkette’s surprise Tobirama arrested his next swing at her ribs, letting the point of his sword drop to rest in the sand. “I cannot end the summoning, but I can release myself from Danzou’s control.”

“You can??” She screeched.

“I created this jutsu during the Second Shinobi World War to revive fallen shinobi to clear the battlefield with what would otherwise be devastating suicidal attacks.” He explained calmly. “In hindsight, it seems that I should not have.”

Sakura, on the other hand, was anything but calm. She could not describe the anger, frustration, and confusion she felt. “Why the hell haven’t you done that already??” She did not care that she was yelling at someone who used to be Hokage of her village. She couldn’t fathom why he would fight when he could free himself.

Tobirama’s answer was logical. “Resisting the control of this kinjutsu is not simple. Until his control weakened, I followed the summoner’s orders.” He made a unique hand seal, one that she had never seen. Color bled into his eyes, making them a dark red.
She nodded. She had noticed earlier that the former Hokages had their individual personalities but not their free will. None of them had wanted to fight their own comrades, but they had no other option.

“I also wanted to test how much Konoha has grown.” He continued. “I have always been wary of alliances. They are nothing more than a pretense. They hide surprise attacks in their gestures of goodwill.”

Sakura could not blame him for that. Madara Uchiha, whom his brother had formed the village with, defected, nearly killed Hashirama, and was currently trying to put the world under a mass genjutsu. Not to mention he was almost killed by Kinkaku and Ginkaku when he tried to make an alliance with Kumo. He had every reason to believe that the alliance between the five nations was a farce.

“My brother’s alliance with the Uchiha almost killed him and brought about the village’s destruction. I warned him from the start that they were not to be trusted. Tell me,” Tobirama ordered sharply, “what has been done with that abominable clan.”

The phrases ‘not to be trusted’ and ‘done with that abominable clan’ echoed in her mind as rage flared in her body. Apart from Madara and Sasuke, who was really more of a douche with little sense of morals than pure evil reincarnated, there was nothing wrong with the Uchiha clan.

“You can’t blame the sins of one man on his whole clan! What about the innocent children? Are they at fault for their parents’ mistakes? The Uchiha clan is an important part of the village. They raise strong shinobi with even stronger loyalties to Konoha.”

He interrupted her rant with a hiss. “The Uchiha have never been loyal to Konoha. Only to themselves.”

“That’s not true.” Sakura protested, thinking of Itachi, Mikoto, Fugaku, and Shisui. They took her in and protected her and her shishou. “I personally know Uchiha that risked their clan and career for the village.”

‘For me, against Danzou. For Tsunade-shishou.’ She mentally elaborated. “You cannot honestly believe only the Uchiha clan can birth traitors. Danzou summoned you to fight for Madara and he’s not from any clan.”

The Nidaime frowned, narrowing his eyes, as he listened to the truth in her words. “I wish to see for myself.”

“See what?” she asked perplexed.

“The Uchihas. I want to verify that they are loyal to my village.”

“But . . . They’re dying to protect Naruto! What more proof do you need?”

“I shall speak with the Sandaime. If he was Hokage for close to fifty years then he knows the Uchiha clan well.”

And just like that the Second Hokage jumped into Kakashi’s battle, leaving Sakura to blink at the spot her opponent was standing in just seconds ago.

‘Should I join them?’ She watched and debated and decided she needed to know Tobirama’s decision. With that, Sakura leapt into the fray as well.
Apparently being food for eight dogs did not prevent Hiruzen from making seals and using jutsus, so Kakashi did not waste words asking why the Nidaime had blocked Hiruzen’s fire jutsu with a water jutsu. He pulled back from the fight, adopting a wait and see stance.

“You too?” He said to Sakura, whose pink head appeared at his side. “Have you no faith in your sensei?”

She snorted. “No. Who let Sasuke do all the dirty work?”

“You didn’t terribly mind it. As I recall, you didn’t try to help him. You took advantage to have some private time with Sai.” He reminded his former student, catching her slight flinch at his name. “And congrats on the Sage Mode. Two out of three is good. My cute little students are practically the second coming of the Sannin.”

Sakura rolled her temporarily black eyes. “Have you no faith in your students?” She parroted his words back at him. “The Sannin weren’t named so until they were in their twenties. We’re better than them. Except for Sasuke, of course”

“Mou, mou, Sakura-chan. You were never a bragger.”

“I earned it, Kakashi-sensei. Shishou herself told me I surpassed her two years ago. And no one can deny that Naruto has become greater than the Kages.”

The two Kage, currently locked in a verbal struggle, stiffened momentarily. “Danzou is dead.” Sarutobi actually sounded upset at his passing.

“Does that mean that your souls are released?”

“Edo Tensei was not designed to end with the caster’s death. He could release our souls when alive, but now our souls and bodies are immortal.” Tobirama explained.

Sakura agreed. The Second Hokage should have never created the damn jutsu.

“Is your will your own again, Lord Hokages?” Kakashi asked respectfully.

“Yes.”

“Then you would allow us to seal you?”

“Oh course,” obliged Hiruzen. “One lifetime was enough.”

Her silver haired sensei removed a bolt of white cloth from his back. One at a time Kakashi tightly wrapped the Hokages in white fabric, completely immobilizing them, slapping a red seal on the front.

“Where did you learn that Kakashi-sensei?”

He pulled his hitai-ate with the kanji for shinobi engraved down over his Sharingan eye. “I borrowed it from a cute kunoichi from Suna.”

“Aw, you guys finished without me.” Naruto whined. “I didn’t get a chance to fight the old man. I was going to prove that I was stronger than all of them.”

Sakura’s eye twitched, irritated. “Why did you summon Tsunade-shishou if you wanted to fight them on your own?”
“I wasn’t going to fight them all at once, Sakura-chan. I’m not stupid.”

She thought otherwise and expressed her feelings by hitting him over the head so hard that he dug into the sand up to his neck. “I’m going to help shishou.” She stalked back to Tsunade’s side.

“That hurt! Hey, wait; dig me out Kakashi-sensei. Don’t leave me behind. Guys!” Naruto called at the two retreating figures. “She has anger issues.” He muttered.

“I heard that Naruto!” The blonde yelped. He was in for it when he got out. Sakura would probably use Sage Mode to punch him back to Konoha.

-ANBU-

“Wow. This place has completely changed. I hope the Raikage has a good landscaping business.” Naruto surmised.

Sakura gawked, marveling both at the sight before her and her teammate’s talent for understatement. The First Hokage had transformed the desert into the forests surrounding Konoha. And towering above the treetops was a titanic wooden statue, two hands clasped in front as if in prayer and the rest arranged in concentric layered rows. There must have been a thousand hands.

“That thing is much taller than Kurama.”

Sakura strained her neck just to see Hashirama standing on the statue’s head. She was awed. “This is unbelievable. I had no idea the Shodai could do this.”

His laughter rang out over the battlefield. “And he’s so laid-back. Like Naruto.” The blonde beamed at the compliment.

Smoke billowed as Hashirama dispelled his giant statue. When it cleared two figures stood before them. The First Hokage, who was already peeling and crumbling, bounded forward to engulf Naruto and clap him on the back. “I hear you want to be Hokage. I can’t believe how much the village has grown. It’s good to know that my dream still lives.”

“Believe it! I’ll be the greatest Hokage ever. Better than all of you! Just wait and see!” Naruto bragged.

Hashirama laughed heartily one last time before he completely crumbled away, his soul was still laugh as he shot into the sky.

“Brat.” Tsunade scolded with affection. “I never said you’d be the next Hokage.”

“It doesn’t matter. I won’t give up. One day I’ll be wearing that hat.” He promised.

-ANBU-

**Wednesday, July 17**

The next day dawned with good news. While Tsunade, Kakashi, Naruto, and herself were battling the previous Hokages, the brother team of A and B beheaded Kisame with their Double Lariat technique. So Madara was official fighting on his own, the last man standing out of an army of 100,000.

The Raikage proudly displayed his trophy on a pike in front of his tent.
Unfortunately, Hiashi and Darui, leader of the First Division and the right hand man of the Raikage had not survived. Sakura had spent the rest of the day consoling a now orphaned hysterical Hanabi, assuring her once student that she was always welcome at the Naras. Yoshino adored having another female around and would never deny the girl that was as good as her second daughter anything.

“You still have family.” Sakura murmured.

She fervently appealed to whatever god existed that the war ended soon.

**Tuesday, July 23**

The Allied Forces enjoyed several days of peace, quiet, and downtime.

Only Killer B and Naruto had anything to do, double checking the identities of every shinobi and scouring the Land of Lightning for any remaining White Zetsus. Naruto made sure to be finished before Sasuke’s birthday.

The blonde threw their third teammate the largest bash ever, inviting the entire army to attend. Sasuke’s eye ticked dangerously as his mother forced him to accept all the well wishes, ranging from polite (his own brother and foreign shinobi), to insulting (Kiba, Naruto, and Shisui), to exuberant (Naruto and Genma.)

The party grew louder as the night wore on. Sakura enjoyed herself immensely. She and Itachi snuggled cozily in his tent, reminiscing best and worst birthdays. Apparently, Shisui, much like Naruto had done today, brought it upon himself to ensure that his favorite cousin did not work on his birthday. Itachi claimed that his most recent birthday was his best because he celebrated it with her. She rewarded him with a sweet kiss for that.

She said her favorite birthday was a tie between her sixth birthday, where her parents presented her with a set of blunted kunai and told her they admitted her into the academy, and her fifteenth, her first with the Naras. And her overly excited mini clone; Hanabi.

Her boyfriend had had some fairly embarrassing parties, all courtesy of Shisui whose sense of humor was not shared by the rest of his clan, once he hit puberty. Shisui said it was his duty to keep his cousin’s ego under control and gag gifts were the perfect tool for the job. Itachi incinerated the lurid hot pink jumpsuit and punished his cousin under the guise of training the next day.

However, Sakura claimed the prize of worst birthday ever. Her fourteenth birthday was probably the worst of everyone’s on Konoha, not including Naruto’s. It definitely beat out Shisui doing his absolute best to embarrass Itachi. Human sacrifices just kill the party mood. Then again, Jinchuuriki meant human sacrifice, and that’s what Naruto became on his birthday, so maybe they tied.

The ground trembled with a resounding thud. Sakura and Itachi dashed out of his tent, along with every other shinobi in the Third Division. A familiar humanoid statue broke through the ground to tower above the skyline. His arms stretched out to his sides and Sakura could see a silhouette that could only belong to Madara in one palm. The party’s joyous laughter became terrified screams.

“That’s the statue from Madara’s hideout!” Sakura exclaimed.

“The Demonic Statue of the Outer Path.” Itachi said grimly.

She let out a weak chuckle. “I think Sasuke’s just won the title of worst birthday ever.”
“Aa.” He agreed.

Even as they raced towards the War Council tent, where no doubt the five Kages were already gathering, the statue metamorphosed grotesquely. The spikes on its back extended and warped. Seven out of nine eyes opened on his head. Its chin lengthened and pointed. It released a deafening howl, showing off a mouth full of teeth.

Sakura released her seals in order to enter Sage Mode. She shut them off just as quickly, shuddering at the malevolence of the monster’s chakra. It was immeasurable and overwhelming.

-ANBU-

The five Kages presented a united front, standing in a line before their troops with Tsunade at the center.

“What the hell is that?”

“I had hoped to revive it in its perfect form,” began Madara conversationally. His baritone carried easily. “You are looking at the vessel of the Ten-Tails.”

That was the cue for mass panic in the ranks. The first nine demons were the source of much fear amongst the villages due to their destructive natures. But those Bijuu could be sealed in human vessels. What sort of creature was the Juubi that it needed such a monstrosity to play the part of its host?

“What Ten-Tails?” A shouted furiously. “There are only nine Bijuu!”

“Sorry bro, but that’s not true, ya know.” Killer B rapped. “Gyuuki says that the Ten-Tails is the source of all chakra. It’s the original form of all nine tailed beasts.”

Naruto halted next to B, orange flames already cloaking his body.

“I thought he needed all the Bijuu for his plan. Isn’t that why he declared war, to capture the Hachibi and Kyuubi?” The Tsuchikage snarled. “If he did not than I would have never entered this war! The protection of a Jinchuuriki is the responsibility of the village it belongs to.”

Tsunade brutally beat the old man with her enhanced strength. “Jinchuuriki are not weapons! If this war was as easy as keeping the Bijuu out of Madara’s hands than Danzou would have repeatedly killed the current host and resealed the Bijuu when it reformed. This war is preventing the world from being shackled by a megalomaniac sociopath!”

“You cannot prevent the Juubi’s revival.” The Uchiha interjected. “Possession of all the Tailed Beasts is not necessary. It will take longer, but the vessel will mature.”

“Naruto! B! Take it down! Don’t let it fully mature!”

“You don’t need to tell me that, Baa-chan. Kurama’s screaming at me already.”

“Gyuuki says in that event we don’t stand a chance, so now’s the time to make our stance.”

“Don’t just stand there, you brat. GO!”

Naruto raised his hand to his forehead in salute, pointing his thumb back at him. “Just leave it to me, Baa-chan.” He moved forward to confront the demonic statue. B followed, giving control of his body to the Eight-Tails, transforming into a mountain sized ox with eight tails resembling octopus tentacles.
Madara landed nimbly before the gathered Kages. “You’re efforts are meaningless. You cannot stop me. I will instigate my Eye of the Moon plan through the Juubi. This world no longer needs heroes like hope or the future. If the Ten-Tails is revived, even if it’s incomplete, I’ll be able to cast Infinite Tsukuyomi. And then reality will end. All the will exist is a single never ending dream. I will create a world free of violence.”

“A world covered in genjutsu is not a world without violence.” Gaara said calmly. Standing comfortably straight with arms crossed over his chest, he was the only Kage that appeared unconcerned by the sudden turn of events. “Taking away free will and enslaving everyone will not bring peace.”

“I will not let you destroy the Juubi.” With a five fingered seal burned into the rock beneath Madara with fire, a column of flames encircled the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path. B, who reached the vessel first, could not arrest his punch, slamming it into a wall of fire. He pulled back his burning fist, crying out in pain.

“HOT! Ow! Hot!”

“Let me try, B. Kurama’s got fire nature.” Naruto let the Kyuubi come forward, transforming into a humongous orange fox. Its nine long tails swished dangerously behind him, creating destructive shockwaves that cracked the earth similar to Tsunade’s inhuman strength. A clawed arm lashed out, striking the barrier. Kurama pulled back, cursing and licking singed fur.

Naruto spoke through the fox’s muzzle. “Together, B. Let’s try to hit it with a Tailed Beast Ball. There’s no way it’ll survive that.”

Gyuuki nodded his agreement. Side by side, the two Bijuu collected, condensed, and shaped their most dangerous attack. Orbs of pure chakra many times the size of the Bijuu themselves were reduced to the size of an orange and swallowed. The Kages watched anxiously as identical beams of energy blasted at the Juubi’s incomplete vessel. There was a bright flash as the fiery barrier vanished and the two attacks connected with the statue.

It was several minutes before the resulting smoke dissipated. “Did it work?” Mei asked, no longer sensing the chakra from the demonic statue. “Is it the end?”

Madara sneered. “It’s the end, alright. Of this world. I have to thank you. If your bijuu hadn’t attacked, it would have taken the Juubi much longer to mature. Did you know that the Bijuuudama contains the chakra of the Bijuu?”

The smoke cleared. The frightening form of the revived Juubi crouched before them. Even crouched it was at least ten times the size of the Kyuubi and Hachibi. It had a singular Eternal Mangekyō eye centered in the upper half of his face, a wide, cavernous mouth with multiple rows of sharp, pointed teeth, several spiky protrusions as tall and wide as the trees hiding Konoha, and no distinguishable hind legs.

It let loose a deafening roar. Its crushing aura forced the Mizukage and the Tsuchikage to their knees. Two of its ten tails framed the full moon behind it.

“Let the show begin.”

Tsunade summoned four slugs. “Tell Ino Yamanaka, Hinata Hyuuga, Sakura, and Shizune to haul ass and get here now or I’m assigning them all to paperwork duty.”

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Ino arrived first, being part of the Fifth Division which was situated at the camp’s edges due to the Samurai’s not wanting to be trapped behind shinobi lines, quickly followed by Hinata.

She listened fearfully as the Hokage explained that she wanted the four females to attempt the Four-Corner Sealing Barrier that they had tried on the Sanbi to capture the Juubi. The Ten-Tails was monstrous, and the blonde feared that sealing the beast would be impossible. She understood that with seals, the amount of chakra didn’t matter. The seal was prewritten and chakra would activate. However, Ino was concerned about her chakra control. The last time they had attempted this jutsu her control had wavered twice, nearly disrupting the jutsu. They could not afford distraction this time. If she lost control for even a second, the Juubi would break through the seal and they wouldn’t get a second chance. There was also the fact that the stronger the Bijuu, the more complex the seal had to be. Would the Four-Corner Sealing Barrier be strong enough?

The Juubi made to blast off its own Bijuuudama. It exploded in the ocean.

“Well that won’t do,” Madara tutted. “That was nowhere near the Intelligence Division.”

Ino’s heart skipped several beats. He was aiming to destroy their Headquarters. That would drastically affect the Alliance’s ability to work together and share Intel. More importantly, her father was at Headquarters.

“Hinata, I need your Byakugan.” The dark haired girl obligingly activated her Kekkei Genkai. “I need you to support my Mind Transfer Jutsu, help me direct it to Madara.”

“Hai.” The Hyuuga heiress wrapped an arm around Ino’s back under her arm, holding her up

Ino closed blue eyes, bringing her hands up to shoulder height, palms facing forward with thumbs touching and her first two fingers overlapping slightly, the other two pointing straight, forming a circle to direct her consciousness. “Shintenshin no Jutsu.”

Hinata did not half to keep the blonde from crumpling. Two seconds after Ino successfully launched her mind she had returned to her body. “I didn’t think he’d be able to break a Byakugan support Shintenshin no Jutsu so quickly. But it was enough. It didn’t hit Headquarters directly.”

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Sakura watched the explosions with a deepening sense of horror as she and Itachi raced to the battlefield. Despite the overwhelming nausea and revulsion she felt, she once more entered Sage Mode. The statue’s foul chakra may have sickened her, but that was a price worth paying to be able to sense the signatures of Tsunade-shishou, Naruto, and the rest of her friends.

That horror turned to fear seeing it launch the Tailed Beast Bomb she had seen Naruto practicing in the desert. The first one struck the water, but based on calculations of trajectory, size, and speed, “Itachi! It’s aimed at Headquarters!”

The pinkette immediately veered, changing course from the ongoing fight to make her way towards HQ. Shikaku was there and she refused to lose another father.

Itachi’s hand clamped around her wrist. “It’s too dangerous, Sakura. You won’t get there in time to warn them.”

“No, you don’t understand! It missed!” Tears rolled down her face. Her voice shook with both fear and frustration. “I don’t know why, but its range isn’t long enough. It’s going to fall short. I can save them.”

He studied her intently. “I must aide with Madara. Be careful.”
“Don’t you dare die on me, Uchiha.” Sakura raced away and didn’t look back.

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In Sage Mode it took her less than a minute to traverse the distance to Headquarters. Shizune and the rest of the Medical Division were already on site. Sakura could already see the motionless bodies of Ibiki, a handful of Yamanaka, and some sensory type ninja. The zone of destruction was so large for an attack that didn’t even touch the base.

“Sakura, don’t just stand and stare. I need your assistance.”

She jumped to obey Shizune’s summon. She cried tears of relief when she recognized the other woman’s patients as her father and Inoichi. Sakura didn’t waste time with standard medical ninjutsu. In the two years since she had first use her Reverse Creation Rebirth Technique she had come a long way in further developing it. She was capable of healing more than one person at a time and had reduced the chakra requirement.

A miniature slug popped into existence on her shoulder. A second appeared on Shizune’s. “Tsunade-sama requires your presence.” The small mollusks said in tandem. The one on the black haired woman’s shoulder continued. “Tsunade-sama also says to bring the scroll.”

Green eyes darted up from her healing. Shizune’s black eyes were just as intense. Sakura healed the two men enough that they were no longer in immediate danger and let the slugs reverse summon her to the Hokage’s side, entrusting that her comrades would finish and see them removed to safety.

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There was a lot of clamoring as the Alliance fell in behind the Kages.

“First Division arrived!” yelled Omoi, Darui’s replacement.

“Second Division arrived!” shouted Kitsuchi.

“Third Division arrived.” Kakashi drawled. “And on time, too!” a Leaf shinobi joked.

“Fourth Division arrived.” Said Shikamaru grimly.

“Same goes for the Fifth Division.” Mifune stated.

“Sensing squad present!”

Madara examined the assembled shinobi with a dismissive look. “So the reinforcements have arrived. Even if you increase your numbers, it will be all bark and no bite. It’s useless. Numbers will not make up for this generation’s incompetence. Your techniques are worthless if compared to those of Hashirama Senju.” Several more Bijuudama followed the first, one of which struck just behind the back lines, wiping out the hind portion of the army.

“Where is the Medical Division?” Tsunade yelled.

“Here, my lady.” The Hokage’s two apprentices aligned with the other division leaders. “I have the scroll and the rest of the division will be along shortly. They are removing the wounded to the medic base.”

“Good. Kages, let’s show this fool the power that comes from sharing bonds.” The five leaders dashed forward to engage Madara, quickly followed by Fugaku, Itachi, Shisui, and Sasuke.
“Is my father alright?” Ino asked, desperation coloring her voice.

“He’ll be fine. Let’s focus on sealing the Juubi.” Shizune ordered. The three younger girls nodded. “First, Kakashi, can you use your Kamui to place this seal on the Juubi?” She hefted the large gold trimmed green scroll that was the center of the Four-Corner Sealing Barrier.

The Copy Ninja took the scroll from her. “Just lay it open so that the whole array is visible.” His Sharingan eye spun and Kakashi pulled himself into another dimension.

Shizune turned to Sakura. “I know it’s not fair, but I need you to supply extra chakra. This isn’t a normal tailed beast. You have the most chakra of the four of us.” She looked pointedly into the currently black eyes Sakura was sporting. “You’ll have to carefully monitor your chakra. I think matching our combined output should be enough.”

“I can help with that.”

“Naruto-kun?”

“Give me your hands. Kurama taught me this neat trick. I can share his chakra with you.” Naruto beamed. “Then you should have enough, right?” Sakura closed her seals. If Naruto was going to volunteer to donate insane amounts of chakra to them she was going to save what she had so she could join the fight or heal afterwards.

“Are you sure you can do that?”

Naruto shouted. “Of course I can. It’s really easy.”

“No, I meant can you afford to give us chakra. You and B-san are necessary to keep the beast occupied while we seal it.” Shizune explained.

The blonde rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “Yeah. It’s fine. No problem. Kurama had a lot.” A quick touch of palms and the four women had the same flaming aura. He then raced off with Killer B to join in the fight against Madara.

“Right,” Shizune broke through Sakura’s admiring thoughts of the Kyuubi’s chakra and how Naruto had managed to come so far when he had to control so much. “Positions.”

Four identical swirls of leaves drifted to the ground as the four kunoichi displaced themselves. Shizune was closest to the alliance, directly in front of the Juubi, with Sakura on the far side, and Hinata and Ino to either side. The air the size of an eyeball was disrupted next to Shizune, and Kakashi exited the other dimension.

The four kunoichi unrolled identical but miniaturized copies of the central scroll, which acted as the focal point of the barrier, at their feet, and formed the hand seals dog, snake, boar, and tiger.

“Kekkai Shihou Fuujin: Tan!” Four thumbs left a bloody trail across the bottom of the seal. The black lines writhed, forming a diamond between the casters along with a line of seals racing to the master copy at the center.

The four females stood, left hands positioned as half of the tiger seal, right arms extended parallel to the ground, palms facing the central seal. Synchronized, they raised their right arms over their heads, a chakra seal lifting off the scroll, pink in the center, and blue connecting to the four women.

With any other Bijuu, they would have maintained the chakra balance, slowly increasing the
amount to widen the opening. Such a strategy would not work with the Juubi, which was so monstrous in size that it would have taken them half a day to enlarge the seal enough to trap it. If they even would have had enough chakra to do so. With Naruto’s gift, it wasn’t necessary.

The barrier expanded rapidly, arcing over to cover the Juubi in minutes. The searching part of the barrier was done.

“We’re switching from search mode into sealing the barrier. Kekkai Shihou Fuujin: Baku!” The pink chakra kanji rewrote itself to say find. The barrier instantly grew taller and wider. Ever so slowly, so as to not alert the Bijuu of the seal hovering above, they gently lowered the chakra net. It continued to increase until the outer rim of the seal formed a circle just in front of the four kunoichi.

The array crackled and sparked with lightning when one of the Juubi’s tails brushed against the net.

“What do you think you’re doing? Fire Release: Dragon Flame Release Song Technique!” The co-founder of Konoha momentarily retreated from his eleven-on-one battle to expel four dragon shaped fireballs in Shizune’s direction.

His attack was doused with water courtesy of Kakashi, who had not left Shizune’s side after he gave the signal. The chakra net touched the ground.

“The Juubi has been completely ensnared within the seal.” Sakura’s voice was heard over their earpieces.

“Good,” replied Shizune. “Now let’s narrow the sphere of the barrier so it will be completely trapped. Kekkai Shihou Fuujin: Sejou!” The seal locked into place. Threads of chakra shot from the seal and wrapped around the Juubi, restraining it.

Madara watched with dawning horror as the chakra threads leeched the Juubi’s chakra, absorbing it to strengthen the seal trapping it. Behind him the Alliance cheered as the Juubi slowly but surely began to shrink as it lost chakra.

“I will not allow you to seal the Juubi!” He shouted. “Mokuton: Mokuryū no Jutsu!” A gigantic wooden dragon reared back, preparing once more to strike at Shizune.

Shikaku’s voice echoed through the mind link established by Inoichi. ‘Now! Shinobi of Kumogakure!’ Cries of “Lightning Style: Lightning Pillar of Light!” and “Lightning Style: Laser Circus!” rent the air. Rays of light so bright that the world was white blinded Madara, increasing his margin of error. The Alliance compounded their jutsus, adding layers of mist, dirt, and bugs. A team of Iwa shinobi raised the earth beneath the four kunoichi performing the sealing jutsu with Earth Release: Earth Moving Core technique.

Madara’s wooden dragon slammed into the raised earth wall, splintering on impact. The four Uchiha stepped forward. The best person to fight an Uchiha, aside from somebody with water nature or Hashirama Senju himself, was another Uchiha.

What followed was a relatively long battle as far as shinobi were concerned. Typically, the standard was to finish off an opponent in less than two minutes. Wasting too much time fighting a single enemy ran the risk of enemy reinforcement’s arriving, increased the chance of mission failure, and almost always resulted in serious injuries or death. It simply wasn’t wise to prolong and draw out a battle unless you were serving as a decoy or distraction. The longer the battle lasted, the more chances there were for fatal mistakes to be made.
The Uchiha battle royale lasted ten minutes before Madara gained a firm upper hand. A wall of black flames, Amaterasu; flames that never stopped burning, danced before him, creating an impenetrable wall between him and the other Uchihas. Madara directed the fires of hell with his Sharingan to encircle him and the Hachibi’s Jinchuuriki.

“You’re a cocky one, thinking you can take this partnership of two –on-one.” B rapped.

The ancient Uchiha gave him a cruel smile. Nine identical copies of himself surrounded B. “Kumo’s arrogance has guaranteed your death. Using a substandard seal so that the Eight-Tails could be used as a weapon against enemies like the beast is a simple kunai. Your Iron Armor Seal is weaker and of a lesser quality than Uzumaki’s. I don’t need the other members of Akatsuki to extract your Bijuu. I have enough chakra to do it myself. Sealing Technique: Phantom Dragons Nine Consuming Seals!”

Nine blue chakra dragons exploded from the Juubi’s mouth, easily slipping past the barrier designed to trap only the bijuu’s chakra. The dragon’s surrounded Killer B, painfully ripping Gyuuki from his host. In a matter of seconds Madara completed a technique that took at least three days. The Hachibi was pulled back into the imperfect Juubi’s mouth and seal away within the statue.

B’s lifeless body hit the ground as the Juubi roared. The Eight-Tail’s chakra also passed through the Leaf kunoichis’ sealing barrier. The additional chakra allowed the Juubi to shift to its second form. The Ten-Tails more closely resembled a humanoid silhouette. Its bodily proportions were very elongated, and emaciated with a twisting neck, yet it retained the spiked bulb from its previous form on its back. The beast possessed visible legs, which it used along with its right arm to stand, as its left arm was missing at the elbow. Its facial appearance changed greatly, growing a single ear on the right side of its head, while its mouth, which now contained straight teeth, moved to the left side and several horns formed on various parts on its head. The monster’s tails now end with hands similar to the chakra arms formed by Jinchuuriki.

Overall, it looked even more hideous and menacing then the last form. The worst part was how it swelled in size, stretching the limits of the barrier like an overfilled water balloon filled to its bursting point.

“Don’t lose control of your chakra!” shouted Shizune. “Focus on the seal. The extra chakra is inconsequential. It will not free the beast. Only we have that power.”

Her speech calmed Ino, who had nearly broken the cage because of arms that were shaking with fear. It restored her faith in the seal. This wouldn’t be like the time with the Sanbi. Sure, the Juubi had gained more chakra, but that was all it received. And the Eight-Tail’s wasn’t much compared to the combined amount it already had from the first seven Tailed Beasts. And it wasn’t being driven to extreme levels of rage.

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Madara took advantage of the wavering barrier. His Sharingan eyes spun, manipulating the Juubi into using Tenpenchii. By manipulating the natural world in its vicinity on an enormous scale, the Ten-Tails simultaneously created a variety of natural disasters that devastated the surrounding area, with itself acting as the epicentre, including earthquakes, floods, thunderstorms, and tornadoes.

Thousands of shinobi died in that attack. The ground beneath their feet was torn asunder. A vast mushroom cloud formed from the resulting blasts. Shizune, Sakura, Ino, and Hinata all went down on one knee in order to maintain their balance.
Madara willed his Amaterasu out of existence, revealing the prone form of the Raikage’s brother for all to see. A let out a strangled scream of rage, disbelief, and despair, and blindly charged the Uchiha, covered from head to toe in his Lightning Release Armor. He was batted aside like he was a gennin. Madara had no interest in the Raikage. He wanted to destroy Senju’s granddaughter and his traitorous clan.

A came at Madara a second time. This time the Uchiha angled his wooden gunbai in front of him, completely blocking the attack and redirecting the lightning back at the Raikage. The resulting electrical charge caught A off guard, and he was thrown several feet away where he remained unmoving and unconscious.

Naruto struggled against Tsunade, desperately wanting to beat Madara within an inch of his life for killing B. The Hokage temporarily knocked him out of commission by scrambling his nerve network. Even with the Kyuubi’s help, it would take a couple of minutes to put right, and by then he would, hopefully, regain his senses.

“This farce has gone on long enough. There is not a single one amongst you that could measure up to me. I am going to end this now. Susano'o.” A towering warrior of blue flames materialized. It had a large angular tengu nose and a mouth carved out with two lines running down to the chin area. It wore pointed shoes, robes, and body armor on its shoulder and waist. There were two sets of arms. The front set wielded straight katana while the back pair, which was plated, extended upwards like wings.

It was a terrifying sight.

Madara was safely ensconced behind its ribs. “It is said that anyone who has seen it dies.” With a jerk of his hand, the twin swords swung.

Tsunade barked for the others to move back as she released her Yin Seal. The purple lines extended down her neck and crossed over, continued down over her breasts, crossing a second time before disappearing underneath her shirt. They were also visible on both her hands.

She raised both arms at shoulder height, parallel to the ground. Her honey colored eyes followed the swords’ descent and at the last second contracted her arms and slammed them back outwards.

Madara stared in shock as she broke the blades of his Susano’o. It took immense power to destroy even a part of his Susano’o. Only Hashirama had ever been able to do so. And he certainly had never done it with his fists. Tsunade may not compare in terms of medical ninjutsu or have the ability to use her grandfather’s wood release, but her brutal strength posed a definite threat. And more than that, her success bolstered the army’s morale, filling them with a hope of winning.

Maybe he should deal with the Kage first. If he killed the leaders of the resistance, the world would bow to his will.

“Yasaka Magatama!” A chain of linked magatama shaped like the tomoe of the Sharingan stretched between the Susano’o’s back hands. They were thrown similar to a shuriken, spinning rapidly at the four still standing Kage.

The Mizukage came up to stand next to Tsunade, whose burns from Susano’o were quickly fading, leaving her to appear as though she hand never been burnt in the first place. “Water Release: Water Encampment Pillar!” A circular barricade of dense water was expelled from her mouth, intercepting Madara’s attack.

Instantly steam rose to cover the battlefield. Gaara took advantage of the smoke screen. Before Madara had even felt the grainy rope around his ankle he had been yank from the protective ribcage of his Susano’o by the Kazekage’s sand.
Working together seamlessly, Ōnoki shaped the rat, boar, and snake hand seals and clapped his palms together. “Jinton: Genkai Hakuri no Jutsu!” When he pulled his hands apart, a sphere of white chakra hung suspended between them. He turned his palms outward. The sphere rapidly expanded until it trapped the Susano’o. The compressed chakra in the sphere’s center exploded with a tremendous amount of force, and as the name suggested, pulverized the Susano’o caught within to minute particles of dust.

Madara’s black eyes narrowed once he regained his feet and saw his final Susano’o was nowhere to be found and Tsunade was uninjured. Maybe she had inherited Hashirama’s talent with medical ninjutsu, but that wouldn’t be enough to beat him.

“Well, I think eight versus one is rather unfair.” He performed the wood clone technique he copied from Hashirama to make eight more copies of himself. Then he cloaked each of them in the complete Susano’o with lower bodies instead of the final version. He chakra coils were extensive, but they had their limits. It would cost more chakra than it was worth to stabilize his Susano’o if the Kages were capable of destroying them. They were only a distraction anyway.

He reveled in their despair, even when four of his clansmen summoned their own Susano’os to battle his. He blinked against a blinding light as the Alliance had its lightning users once more cast their brightest jutsus. Two of his Susano’o clones dematerialized.

Still, six Susano’os were more than enough to wreak havoc. And they did. The Kages struggled to fight them off while the Uchihas pitted Susano’o against Susano’o.

Sasuke, in a moment of genius, summoned Manda, the boss summon of the snakes. Manda was snobbish and proud of himself, believing himself to be superior to everyone.

“You brat!” He hissed at Sasuke. “How dare you summon me? I only serve Orochimaru.” Sasuke’s Sharingan swirled. The hypnotized snake detached his lower jaw to swallow one Susano’o whole. Sasuke dismissed the giant purple and black striped snake that was screaming in agony as it was burned alive from the inside.

“And where did you learn that, little brother.” Itachi queried.


Itachi nodded sagely. Anko was more than a little crazy, and her personality was hard to deal with for more than a few hours at a time. If Sasuke was learning Orochimaru’s techniques from the woman, he would have spent years under her tutelage. It must have taxed his sanity greatly.

Tsunade capitalized on Sasuke’s summoning, seeing as his snake ate her opponent, and summoned Katsuyu. “Divide yourself, one for every shinobi.”

“At once, Milady.” The blue striped slug divided into thousands of small scale versions of herself. Each slug attached itself to shinobi that were alive, as a precaution, and to those that were injured, and made use of Tsunade’s channeled chakra to heal.

Naruto, too, summoned, figuring if Gamabunta’s sword was strong enough to cut through Shukaku it was strong enough to cut through Susano’o. And he was right. After promising the boss toad enough sake to make Tsunade drunk, the rusty red toad leapt into action, his tantō slicing a Susano’o in half with minimal resistance.

The final four Susano’o clones were dealt with in short order by the Susano’os summoned by Fugaku, Itachi, Sasuke, and Shisui. Itachi’s Susano’o equipped with the Sword of Totsuka, an ethereal sword with the ability to seal anything it pierced into the gourd that served as its hilt, and
the Yata Mirror, a shield that could reflect any attack, sealed two of the clones like it was child’s play.

Madara seethed. He was the strongest shinobi alive. He had stolen some of Hashirama’s cells during their fateful battle that created the Valley of the End, and the incorporated DNA made it so that he had the body and chakra reserves he had at his peak. If Hashirama Senju could not defeat him, no one could. He would take care of them all personally if he had to.

The eldest Uchiha picked up the broken Susano’o blade of his final Susano’o. With the great speed he had built upon since childhood, Madara rocketed across the distance between him and Tsunade, his immense sword raised at the Hokage’s unprotected and unsuspecting back.

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Shisui was a very humble Uchiha, despite his bragging moments when he was flirting with a pretty girl or joking with his cousins. However, he was extremely proud of his speed. Shisui was renowned as “Shisui of the Body Flicker.” He could not teleport instantly like the Fourth Hokage, but he would only be seconds behind him.

It was this speed that let him get between his Hokage and his ancestor and push the Slug Sannin out of harm’s way.

The sword, poised to split Tsunade clean in half, was intercepted by Shisui.

“SHISUI!!!” Itachi cried as his best friend’s body split into an upper half and a lower half. Red blood stained the rocks. “Shisui!”

Tsunade stumbled and whirled in time to see him take the blade meant for her. Two dozen Katsuyus converged to her when called, compressing together into a Katsuyu large enough to absorb the two halves of Shisui. “Have no fear, Itachi-san, Milady, I shall put him back together.”

A switch flipped inside Itachi. Hatred burned hot through his veins. At his core, Itachi was a gentle person. He looked for the easiest solution, usually the one that required the least amount of bloodshed. He was a shinobi, and killing was part of the job. He accepted missions to end another’s life because in some manner, it benefited his village. Itachi did not kill because he enjoyed it. He would sacrifice everything for Konoha.

But he refused to sacrifice those he loved for a greater good.

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Sakura grinned wildly at Shizune, who stood across from her. The Juubi’s sealing had progressed uninterrupted, and now it was down to the size of Akamaru. There were only a few feet between the kunoichis, and in another ten or so minutes the Juubi would be completely sealed.

To her right, Ino shared her enthusiasm. It was hard not to. The blonde always dreamed of becoming renowned. She loved being in the spotlight, and being known as one of the four people to seal the Bijuu would satisfy that crave.

Ino’s elation of her upcoming popularity was short lived.

A wooden clone of Madara pressed against her side, one arm thrown over her shoulders. “Do you know what happens to a chain when you break the weakest link?” He asked casually, almost in a bored tone. “It breaks. It shatters. It falls into pieces.”

The clone hefted a kama in its right hand. The weapon was sickle shaped, with a short handle and
a pointed, curved beak. Traditionally, the kama was a throwing weapon. The short handle increased the potential for the spinning blade to hit the target. But, at close contact, against a girl that couldn’t move without disrupting her barrier, he could use a standard kunai.

He positioned the blade’s point right in front of her heart and yanked back. The clone then dispelled, with one girl dead his job was done.

“INO!” Sakura screamed. She could do nothing but watch as Ino fell to her knees, coughing blood. She could not move. “Ino!” she screamed again. Sakura stretched her right hand, maybe she could reach her.

“St...stop. Don’t. Sa...Saku...ra. M’fine. Ka...tsu...yu can heal...me.” Blood dribbled down both sides of her mouth. “I...can...fin...ish.”

“Ino-chan,” Hinata said through tears. “Don’t. Hi...nata. I will...do...this.”

Sakura let her tears fall freely. Ino was her first friend. Ino had defended her from bullies that teased her for her overly large forehead. Ino had saved her from a friendless childhood, inspired her to become a kunoichi. They were best friends and rivals. And she couldn’t save her.

Katsuyu did her best to stem the flow of blood and knit the muscle of the heart back together. Heart injuries were tricky and needed to be handled delicately. But Katsuyu couldn’t work miracles. She could channel Tsunade’s chakra and encourage a wound to heal, but something like a heart wound needed a level of skill she didn’t possess and carefully constructed seals.

Katsuyu could only extend her life long enough for the seal to be completed.

-Anbu

Sakura watched through tear blurred eyes as the seal finished. The Juubi has shrunk to the size of a kitten, then the top of the seal, where the kanji for ‘lock’ was displayed widened and vanished. A beam of pure chakra shot into the sky. The moon shone blue from the volume of chakra, drawing the gazes of all the shinobi below.

The second the last of the Juubi was trapped in the moon Sakura knelt at Ino’s side, lifting her blonde head and laying it gently in her lap.

Ino gave her a weak smile. “To...told you I’d...do...it, fore...head.”

Sakura’s tears mixed with the blood on Ino’s face. “Just hold on pig.” Her hands were already glowing green with medical chakra. “I can save.”

Ino smiled sadly as an answer. “No...you. can’t. Too...much. dam...age.”

“Ino.”

“You’ve...bloomed...in...to...a beau...ti...ful...Saku...ra.”

“Thank you, Ino.” The light dimmed in her blue eyes. Ino’s dead gaze was fixed on the still glowing moon.

Hinata and Shizune each put a hand on her shoulders, to give her comfort and support. “I know you’re hurting, Sakura, but we have a war to end.” Shizune reminded her.

Sakura stood, drying her tears with a brush of her hand.
Madara was stunned.

How could four no name kunoichis seal away the Juubi? His ultimate weapon. His tool for casting his Eye of the Moon plan. It was inconceivable.

Behind him thousands of shinobi cheered. With the Ten-Tails gone, they had won half the battle. The other half would be downhill. Madara might be legendary, but he was human and had his limits. There would come a time when he was running on fumes. And when that time came, there would be plenty of shinobi to finish him off.

Madara had lost. And he could see it. He stood no chance. Shameful as it was, because only Hashirama had ever forced him to retreat, Madara could see no other option. He could not lose here. Let them rejoice their victory and live in fear of his next attack.

He would not retreat without leaving behind a reason to fear him. Madara’s eye bled as he summoned two more Susano’os overlaid over wooden clones. The gargantuan being of fire loomed over head. Simultaneously, Madara weaved three hand signs with the Susano’os, each making either the ram, snake, or bird, seal.

The jutsu drew a succession of massive meteorites from the atmosphere, all aimed for the center of the Alliance where they would cause the most carnage. One after another, three meteorites crashed into the heart of the Alliance. The tremors rocked the earth and shook the ocean.

The dirt and debris provided plenty of cover for Madara to make a final attack. His target was one of the Uchiha that sided with the Senju. Killing just one would tide him over while he hid in the shadows once more. A sword flamed into existence in his palm.

Madara took great pleasure in thrusting a Susano’o sword through the stomach of one of his traitorous clansmen.

There was no wince or exclamation of pain. Itachi disregarded the potentially fatal wound to his lower abdomen and the searing pain. He locked eyes with his ancestor. Two pairs of Sharingan eyes blazed; Itachi’s Mangekyō and Madara’s Eternal Mangekyō.

“The Uchiha clan is stronger than the Senju. Konoha does not value our clan like it should. We should be revered like gods. I helped create that village, and they threw me away. Konoha does not deserve your loyalty.” He hissed.

“Izanami.” Itachi uttered.

Madara froze, eyelids closing. Itachi slowly pulled himself off the sword, pressing a hand to the wound to staunch the bleeding.

After what seemed to be a century the dust cleared. A platoon of Suna shinobi blew it away.

Tsunade tensed, seeing Madara standing still just feet from her. Was it a trick? A clone to distract them? To what end? So he could flee? Or for a surprise attack?

She approached Itachi when Madara hadn’t made a move. “What did you do to him?”

“Izanami.” Sakura answered shortly. Tsunade did a double take as her pink haired apprentice suddenly appeared next to them, gently catching Itachi as the man collapsed from an injury she hadn’t seen. “The simple explanation, it’s a kinjutsu. Madara is trapped within an infinitely looping genjutsu, one that disregards all his senses.”
“Can he escape it?”

Sakura snorted. “While the technique itself isn’t infallible, the only way to end it is for him to accept his destiny. I don’t see him doing so anytime soon. He’s spent decades trying to alter it.”

“I see,” Tsunade answered, even though she didn’t fully understand.

“Don’t worry, Shishou. It’s extremely difficult and you need a Sharingan to use it. I studied their scrolls and still have difficulty grasping it. Needless to say, Madara’s been dealt with.” Sakura assured her.

The blonde nodded, exhaustion finally making itself know. “We should do something with him, just in case.” Tsunade order Madara behead, graciously letting Mei have the honor of actually removing his head from his body as restitution for his deeds against Kirigakure. Then she let the Uchiha clan burn the pieces. Naruto finished it, sealing his ashes into a scroll, which he promptly handed to Fugaku, seeing it as the Uchiha clan’s right to decide what to do with it.

“Very thorough, Hokage-sama.”

Sakura turned beady eyes on her boyfriend. His right eye was still Sharingan red, but his left was his natural onyx color. Using Izanami had made it so that Itachi would never again use his Sharingan in his left eye.

“That’s twice you’ve nearly died on me.” She poked his recently closed and still sore wound.

“Twice?” he coughed.

“Hand of God? Ringing any bells?”

“Aa. That was your fault. You got caught.”

“My fault,” Sakura laughed, “I don’t think so. Who was it that told me to gossip with stall owners? Let me think. You?”

“You saved me then, too?”

The conversation sobered. “And I’ll always save you. And if you ever die, I’ll go to Orochimaru, get the reanimation jutsu from him, and bring you back to kill you myself.”

“He doesn’t part with his secrets lightly.” Itachi played along. “What would you give him? Would you teach him Creation Rebirth? Then he wouldn’t need a new host every three years.”

“Sasuke.” She answered at once. Fugaku, who overheard the conversation, laughed with them as Sasuke spluttered and reddened.

Sakura helped Itachi stand, steadying him with one arm around his waist as he placed his left around her slim shoulders. Green eyes surveyed the carnage that was a culmination of months of war. The dead littered the ground, some only recognizable by the uniform they wore. She could see Gaara and Kankuro crying of the body of their sister. There was a crowd of Iwa shinobi around the tiny form of the Tsuchikage. The old man had drastically altered how much damage Madara’s meteorites caused. And the strain of stopping them had caused his body to give out.

The war was finally over, and of the 80,000 shinobi the Alliance had started with, less than a fourth of that was standing before her.

“Come on,” she urged, pulling Itachi along. “Let’s go check on Shisui. Katsuyu says she put him
back together.”
“You’re supposed to be resting.”

Sakura turned to face her husband, who bent down to kiss her gently. “I keep telling you, I don’t need to rest.”

“Sakura, you’re thirty-six weeks pregnant. You shouldn’t be working.”

“Honestly, Itachi, it’s not a problem.” She rolled her eyes. “I stopped going on missions as soon as I knew I was pregnant. And I stopped working at the hospital completely two weeks ago. Sitting in a chair doing paperwork all day is nowhere near as stressful or tiring as working a six hour shift. Graveyards and forty-eight hours are completely different.”

The Fourth Shinobi World War had ended seven years ago. Sakura visited the war memorial that had been erected next to the Stone Memorial at least once a year. The first month after the war she practically lived in that clearing. She thanked Kami for those that lived, mourned for those that had died, and begged Ino to forgive her for not saving her. Ironically, it was Kakashi of all people who told her standing in front of the memorial remembering better times was not healthy and regret would result in her turning out like him.

Naruto, true to his word, had taken the mantle of Hokage from Tsunade, who retired and was now traveling the countries again gambling to her heart’s content, three years ago. Naruto wasn’t the youngest Kage ever, Gaara had that recognition at the age of fourteen, but he was the youngest Hokage at twenty-one. His father, the Fourth Hokage, had been twenty-five.

In true Naruto fashion, the blonde had made many friends from the other nations, particularly the other Kages. He had a mysterious power. Everyone who met him became his friend, no matter how little contact they had beforehand. His magic even worked on the Raikage. Admittedly, that friendship took the longest to form. The Raikage was very upset with his brother’s death during the war and used his grief to fuel a hatred for Konoha, claiming that the Leaf Village was dangerous since they were now the only country in possession of a Bijuu. Needless to say, Naruto worked his magic and made him see sense. With all the other Kages now Naruto’s friend, maintaining peace between the Five Elemental Nations was easy. It also helped that there wasn’t a shinobi out there that could hold a candle to Naruto, but there was no reason for the other villages to attack Konoha.

Each year Naruto left Konoha to visit the other villages. He spent one month in each village and thus was gone from Konohagakure for four months. He had convinced her not to rebuild Whirlpool as Konoha’s ally once more. Aside from being his mother’s birthplace, Naruto had no attachment to Uzushio. Konoha was his home. So he convinced her to take over Shizune’s position. As his assistant, Sakura stepped in as Hokage for those four months.

It was the first time in any village’s history that there were co-Kages. Sakura had argued against it adamantly in the beginning, pointing out that Naruto was more than capable of leaving behind a clone or ten to do his job. He shot her argument down by saying that a clone was not capable of defending the village should the need arise; one direct hit and it was gone. Sakura couldn’t fault that logic and accepted the job.

To some, the job would seem stressful. But to Sakura it wasn’t. She had been Tsunade’s assistant for a decade. She knew the job as well as she did her position as Head of the hospital, and both required she sign her name on a million different forms.
They had returned home to a village that had been completely rebuilt, and contrary to her fears, hers and Itachi’s relationship had not fallen apart or lost its thrill. Mikoto had been overjoyed when Itachi brought her home to announce their courtship and nearly spontaneouslycombusted when her eldest proposed. Sakura had immediately relinquished the job of planning the wedding to the mothers. She didn’t care how it happened so long as she was Mrs. Itachi Uchiha at the end of the day.

Despite the village being in peace time, Sakura needed to keep herself busy. She had participated in ANBU missions until she found herself pregnant. Unlike her mother-in-law, Sakura refused to quit her multiple jobs. She took missions, worked the hospital, creating a wing just for ANBU shinobi that had restricted access, a.k.a only she, the ANBU medic, was allowed in, continued to assist Tsunade in every way but fetching her alcohol, and took Hanabi on as her apprentice.

Her husband continually told her that she worked too much. Maybe he was right, but she had been pushing herself for over a decade, ever since she graduated the Academy. Every time he mentioned her workaholic tendencies, she argued that he worked harder than she did, and he was forced to drop the matter or face his wife’s traumatizing hormonal wrath.

“This will all be here in the morning.” Itachi tried to convince her that putting it off a day wouldn’t kill her.

“Only if I don’t finish it now.” She said pointedly. “Besides, Naruto will be back in another three weeks. By that point they won’t even call me in for emergency cases and you can lock me inside the house then.”

“Must you be so stubborn?”

“You knew what you were getting into when you married me.”

“I don’t think I did.” He nuzzled her neck. “There used to be a time when you obeyed me.”

Sakura snorted. “Yeah, and Tsunade-shishou reamed me out for it, too,” she teased. She adopted a more serious tone as she gazed into his concerned dark eyes. “Trust me, love. This isn’t my first baby.” Sakura and Itachi were the proud parents of a beautiful baby girl with raven locks and onyx eyes. A typical Uchiha complexion, but Hikari Uchiha took after her mother in personality and fittingly was as smart as a Nara. Their little girl was almost five and quite the prodigy. She idolized her parents and wanted nothing more than to be a kunoichi.

The pair was leaving the gender of their second child a surprise. Sakura secretly wished for a boy. One of each would be perfect. Mikoto wanted another granddaughter. Her mother-in-law had an almost scary obsession. She already painted their nursery a pale pink.

The door to Naruto’s office swung open and his receptionist timidly poked her head through. “Hokage-sama, Team Four has returned.”

Sakura had long ago stopped protesting when people addressed her as Hokage-sama. She had argued that it was only four months of the year and only when Naruto was traveling and maintaining Konoha’s peaceful relations with the other nations, but that didn’t matter to everyone else. Naruto had given an impassioned speech on how the village was to obey her like she was him while he was gone and had gone as far as to order that her face be carved into the mountain underneath his. And so Naruto’s and hers likenesses were immortalized in the rock.

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The best thing regarding the Hokage Monument, the second they had returned from the war, Tsunade-shishou ordered that she remove Danzou’s face. Sakura took great pleasure in using her strength strong enough to crack mountains to actually demolish part of a mountain. It was very
therapeutic to finally be able to take out her frustrations on the man that manipulated the village from the shadows for half a century.

“Have them report in the morning.” Her brown hair bobbed as she retreated back to her desk.

Sakura returned her attention back to the infinite stacks of paperwork on her desk. She finally agreed to leave after an hour to appease her husband.

-HOKAGE-

As it was, Sakura was forced out of the office in half that time.

Their second bundle of joy decided to come early. Itachi rushed her to the hospital and she was rolled into the delivery and maternity wing. Within the hour the entirety of their immediate family had been roused from their beds and was crowded into the hospital’s lobby.

Sakura ordered her staff to keep the majority of them away from her room. Only Itachi and Shikamaru, holding his niece who demanded that she be present when her little sibling was born, were allowed in with her. And Shisui, too. After managing to get Itachi drunk one night, he had convinced them to name him godfather to all their children. It was Sakura’s excuse for stopping with this one. He would have been forced to wait with the rest of the family, but the nurses obeyed his every whim because he had sacrificed himself for Tsunade.

It was a long and painful seven hours, but as the sun painted the Hokage Mountain orange the nurse placed a cleaned up and measured baby wrapped in a blue blanket into the father’s arms.

“Ne, don’t you think the mother should get to see the baby first? After all, I carried it for nine months and just pushed it out of my body.” She teased, seeing Itachi’s shocked face.

“Him.” He said softly, gently shifting the baby boy to be cradled in her arms. Sakura’s eyes widened as she gazed at her first son. “You’ve done the impossible love.”

Naruto must have rubbed off on her. Her baby boy had tufts of her bright pink locks. “How? Aren’t your Uchiha genes supposed to be superior? I’ve never seen an Uchiha that didn’t have dark hair and dark eyes.”

Itachi held Hikari on his hip so that she could see her little brother. Shikamaru slipped out of the room to inform the rest. Shisui flickered away to develop pictures he could share with the whole clan. “He has hair like mommy. I want pink hair too.” She pouted.

Itachi slanted his lips over his wife’s. “He’s perfect. It doesn’t matter that he has pink hair. In fact, he’ll probably be stronger because of it. After all, you’re the strongest woman I know.”

Sakura blushed at his praise. He was right. In the academy, no one took her seriously because of her pink hair, so she proved them all wrong by being the smartest and training to become the strongest too. She, Naruto, and Sasuke were famous since the war. They were heralded as the second coming of the Sannin. Their son wouldn’t let the color of his hair hinder him. There wasn’t a shinobi in the world that would underestimate him in a fight just because he had pink hair.

“Kane. His name is Kane Uchiha.” Itachi murmured his agreement. “And Itachi, he’s the last one.”

Her husband gave her a devilish smirk. She nearly melted into a boneless puddle. “I sure I can convince you to have more.”

Sakura smiled softly. She had no doubts that he could. She loved him and would do anything for
him. If more children made him happy they would have more. She had been an only child, lonely and bullied. Sakura would have loved to have siblings, so she probably wouldn’t deny Itachi and her children if they truly wanted a larger family.

However, it was very tempting to deny Shisui. After the incident with her daughter, the lack of tomatoes in the village for a week, the bread knife, Naruto, and a pet squirrel, Sakura wasn’t sure she wanted him to corrupt more of her children.

“You have to tell your mother that it’s a boy.” She laughed at her husband’s grimace. She knew Mikoto would be happy to have another healthy grandchild, but the woman really wanted more females to balance out all the testosterone.

“She’s going to have to repaint the nursery.”

Sakura smiled softly at Kane’s fuzzy pink hair. “I think the pink should be fine.”

-HOKAGE-

Naruto returned in three weeks as scheduled. He barely had the time to gush over the cute pink-haired Uchiha baby boy before Sakura punched his lights out.

The blonde cowered, holding his head in his hands. “Mou, what was that for, Sakura-chan?”

“That,” she said pointedly, “was for leaving your duties to me when you knew I was due.”

“How was I supposed to know he would come early?”

“When does a baby ever come on time?” Sakura asked, raising a slim eyebrow.

Naruto grinned sheepishly at her. He and Hinata had three children, one set of identical boys and another son, and Hinata was currently pregnant again, this time with a girl. All three of his kids had come early. The pair had gotten together right out of the war, and were the first to get married and have children.

“Sorry, Sakura-chan. It won’t happen again.”

“You bet it won’t. The next time I’m putting you in the hospital so that you can’t leave. Even Kurama would need a month to fix you.” Sakura threatened. Then she hit him upside the head with chakra.

“Sakura-chan!” the Hokage whined.

“And that was for teaching my five year old daughter your Sexy Jutsu!”

Sometimes Sakura didn’t understand her daughter. The girl was under the impression that Naruto was someone to copy. Just because the Hokage is supposed to be revered did not mean she needed to transform into a female version of him. Although honestly, there were worse role models. That honor belonged to Uncle Sasuke.

Naruto gulped and nodded his head furiously, fervently promising to never leave if she was pregnant or to teach her children any more of his perverted jutsus. The rosette let up her assault. Naruto never broke a promise.

-HOKAGE-

And Naruto kept his word. The blonde, through a combination of the Uzumaki’s natural longevity
and the Nine-Tails sealed inside him, had the longest tenure as Hokage. In that period, Sakura had four more children. Only one was due around the time of his vacation. Naruto rescheduled his trip and didn’t leave until her baby was at least a month old.

Hinata, Shizune, and herself also enjoyed longer than natural lives. It was an unexpected benefit from when he had shared the Kyuubi’s chakra with them so that they could seal the Juubi. So, Sakura eventually retired from active duty around the age of eighty and enjoyed watching her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and nieces and nephews grow up, passing on the slug contract to her eldest daughter.

Itachi passed on first, at the age of ninety-three. It was quite the accomplishment for a ninja to live beyond forty, and he had lived more than twice that.

Sakura herself was approaching one hundred when Naruto asked a favor of her.

The Bijuu had always been a point of contention amongst the Elemental Nations. As new Kages were sworn in, they argued that something should be done about the Kyuubi, that it wasn’t fair that Konoha still had control of a Tailed Beast. Naruto always soothed their ruffled feathers, but never shared how with her.

“I promised to have Kurama sealed in the moon with his brothers and sisters. That way no one will have a Tailed Beast. There will be no more Jinchurriki.”

Sakura agreed with his decision. It had actually been Kurama’s idea. He did not wish for an existence of being released and resealed into another human. He had faith in Naruto, but scorned the rest of the human race. Naruto had grown on the fox and Kurama genuinely cared for him. Kurama claimed none would compare with Naruto.

The blonde took that to mean he was more than just bearable like the Kyuubi had been calling him and that Kurama actually like him and wished he could spend eternity with him. Even at a century old, Naruto was still idealistic.

“Are you sure this is what you want, Naruto?” she asked, concerned.

“Positive, Sakura-chan. Konoha’s safe. There’s peace amongst all the nations. Kurama will be with his family again and so will I.” It wasn’t anything spectacular, like his speech when he finally took the helm of Hokage, but Sakura knew exactly how he felt. He was filled with an easy confidence and sureness of himself and his decision.

So Sakura commandeered the three best medic-nins out of the hospital. Naruto released the seal on the Kyuubi’s cage inside his mind. He lived long enough to exchange a taunting but meaningful goodbye with the fox that had been his companion since birth and a “Don’t make us wait too long,” to Sakura.

Kurama sat still as the Four-Corner Sealing Barrier leeched his chakra and constricted. Just after night had fallen, the last of the Kyuubi had been sealed into the moon with the other Tailed Beasts. The other three medic-nins had been sworn to silence about their participation.

Konoha and the other villages were informed of the Kyuubi’s sealing. Sakura prepared an outlandishly orange funeral for Konoha’s Orange Hokage. Shinobi from every village come to honor one of the last heroes of the Fourth Great Shinobi War. Naruto had kept his promise from when Team 7 had first met with their sensei. He had followed his dream and became a Hokage like no other, greater than all of those that came before him.

As promised, she followed her best friend into death’s arms. Sakura was dreaming about her life
the night she died, one week after Naruto’s death. She had grown from a little naïve girl that
signed up at the academy to catch the attention of a cute boy to a kunoichi recognizable for her
own strength. She had risen above the low expectations of herself and others. She surpassed
Tsunade with her medical ninjutsu, which she never stopped designing. She was the only shinobi
that could claim to have killed three Akatsuki. She had earned the titles of Akatsuki’s Bane and
Slug Sage and Hokage. She had been a wife, mother, and grandmother.

Sakura passed away quietly in her sleep, surrounded by her very large family, with a gentle smile
on her face.

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